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Silence Farm

BY

WILLIAM SHARP

LONDON
GRANT RICHARDS

1899

TO

SIR GEORGE DOUGLAS, BART.

IN OLD FRIENDSHIP

Silence Farm

Chapter I

A HAZE of vapour saturated the August night, rising from the sodden earth. In the heavy damp the pinging of midges filled the air. Darkness crept from bush to bush, from clump to clump, along the viewless flats and ridges of Wardlaw Muir, although the sky in the west was still afame with scarlet splatches. Between the narrow blood-red bands which sliced the uprising dark above the moors, and the moors themselves, a greenish light fell upon the marshes which lie to the north of Muirton.

Outside the dishevelled byres, west of the farmhouse, and above which a thin reek hung, a woman stood. A short distance away, on the moor edge, a donkey rested, silent, motionless, his head low, the gray hide already black with penetrating

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dusk: Farther to the right, beside a stone dyke, an old white horse stared blankly down the way of the retreating light, motionless and silent as the ass. Each might have been the phantom image of labour over and done, caught momentarily at the passing of the day.

The woman was as motionless, as silent. Her arms hung to the clasped hands. The last fiery gleams fell upon her face, young and strong and comely, and perhaps elsewhere beautiful; the whiter in that dusk because of the sunset flame, which also filled her thick, upcoiled hair with furtive metallic shimmers. On the broken thatch of the byres the brown became the colour of fallen plums; the black grew soft and purplish as a haze of sloes.

Only her eyes moved, and these slowly. Once a tremor passed over her, and she blew a sudden breath downwards: a night-moth had fluttered against her dress, attracted, perhaps, by the whiteness of the homespun bodice she wore, girt by a leathern belt at the waist, above a blue-and-white-striped kirtle, which came close to her ankles when let down, though now tucked well up from

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the bare feet, whose white skin was dirtied with the soilage of the byres.

A few rooks, flying low in scattered return, passed like blown leaves. But there was no wind. Across the seemingly breathless moors not a sound crept into the brooding stillness, except the wearisomely incessant croaking of frogs. Near, Margaret Gray could hear nothing save the heavy breathing of the kye, the sudden scratching of rats, the dull restless noise of shifting hoofs, the soft scrunching of silky flanks against smooth wood.

When there was nothing left of all the broken wreck of flame but a single blood-red splash, like a windy pennon over a lost field, Margaret abruptly moved. A loud, stertorous breathing within the byre had caught her ear.

She had already finished the milking; the dung, too, had been swept into the byre gutter. There was no more to see to than Whiteleaf, the new southland cow that was heavy with calf.

She had hardly entered the byres, unconsciously straining her eyes because of the gloom, wherein the white flanks and legs of the kye glimmered like cloudy moonlight, when a dull rumble of thunder startled her.

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She watched for the momentary lift of lightning. None came. For a minute or more she stood listening, waiting. Again a sullen, booming noise, breaking away into a surf of sighing. She fancied that a bat's-wing of light flickered across the rafters, where among old pitchforks and rake-handles a cluster of hens rustled uneasily.

Suddenly the great void of darkness without was filled with wind. It appeared to spring from the darkness overhead, to leap from the darkness beneath, to rush in from the wastes of darkness around.

Whiteleaf began groaning heavily. Margaret moved towards her. She put her hand on the heaving flanks, where the calf was stirring in its blind struggle with life; the cow moaned, but caught her gasping breath as though momentarily hushed.

"Quiet now—quiet now, poor beastie," she muttered, stroking and soothing the while; then, leaning, she was about to help the panting beast with the strong compelling of both her supple hands, when she heard a heavy step plodding by, and almost simultaneously a man's voice called hoarsely:

"Are ye there, Margaret?"

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Instinctively she looked sidelong across her left shoulder, but made no answer.

The man passed, grumbling.

For awhile she stood idly, passively, perhaps listening.

An abrupt lull of the wind had brought the old invading silence again. The hens were still now; there was only the heavy, uneasy breathing of the labouring cow, and the monotonous slurch of chewing the cud from the other cows, all of which were on their haunches, supine, save three. The silence deepened, became intense; the sudden falling of a rake filled the byre with loud sound.

Again a step. Margaret did not stir. The door opened. A wedge of darkness came out of the darkness, and the door closed upon it. A whisper fell softly.

“Are you there, Margaret?”

She could see the speaker now, though he could not yet see her. She made no sign.

“Madge, lass, are ye there?”

A rat scuttled among the straw; the groaning of the labouring cow grew more rapid and insistent.

“Faith! it’s gae hot in here, wi’ a stench

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to't at that. Madge, Margaret." . . . The whisper had now become louder.

Margaret stirred. The man heard, and stepped forward cautiously. The girl, reluctant, made no move.

"What is't, dear lass? What's wrang wi ye noo?" .

"Awa' back to the hoose, James Ruthven. I'm wantin' nane o' your company here."

In a moment the voice and manner of the newcomer changed.

"But, Margaret dear, tell me, why are you angry?"

"Why did you speak to me in that common way, James? You tell me one day you love me, and that I'm good enough for you, and the next you speak to me as though I were—as though I were Aggie Saunders or Maggie the slop-lass."

"I was only badgerin', Madge dear; I meant no harm. Forgive me; I was a fool. Come now, my dearie, let's have a kiss."

The man spoke gently, caressingly; his voice, refined now in tone and word, thrilled the girl.

~~She leaned~~ forward and kissed him lightly on the brow.

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He caught her left hand, then her arm, and pulled her close; the next moment his arm was round her waist, and he had his lips on hers and kissed her twice. She put him from her a little impatiently. Then, in hushed tones, they spoke for a time of what was to be done.

‘Is it true, James, that your father says there’s no other way for’t?’

“You mean about Lizzie Drummond?”

“Yes, of course, I mean about Miss Drummond.”

“It’s true enough, by God! Well, then; I won’t swear, though why you should be so damned particular, Madge, I can’t make out.”

“It isn’t the swearing. Every stot has its own snort. But I don’t like to hear you say ‘by God!’ especially when it’s only about you, or you and me, or you and me and that other woman.”

James Ruthven laughed lightly.

“Swear not at all . . . but if you do, don’t do it to your sweetheart, unless you’re jealous, when you may damn all round the farm.”

The girl was silent.

“Madge.”

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No answer.

"Come, I say, Madge; you're not offended now, are you?"

"No, James; I was thinking. I suppose men think it right to say what they like to a girl *before* marriage."

"Oh, nonsensè, my lass! That's all fudge. But now about this affair. What am I to do? Here's *you*, and my love for *you*, Madge, on the one side; and here's my father with all his heart and life set upon my marrying Miller Drummond's daughter, and you know the man my father is. It's not only that he will turn me off without a penny-piece, and that you and I wouldn't have the means to buy a slate for our impossible house. It's not only that."

"What else is it, James?"

The man stirred restlessly, as though irritated by the quiet voice of the girl. Perhaps, too, he realized her unspoken thought, that other men and women, that other men, would rather have love and the chances of life than a warm heritage and a cold heart.

"Why, you know well enough, Madge. When's Whiteleaf going to calve?"

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"In an hour or two—perhaps less. I'll send Sandy in to look to her. I'm going now."

"Wait a minute, dear. We're alone here, Madge. Let us love when we can. Give me a kiss, my girl."

"No. Let go, James! Do you hear, James! Let go."

"But why not, Maggie dear?"

"There's . . . your father . . . and . . ."

"Lizzie Drummond!"

"Yes, Miss Drummond."

"Oh, confound them both!"

"If you will give me your word that this is all talk, and that you will be true to me, then you can kiss me, Jim, and welcome. But no kiss of yours shall touch me if you're playing love with two women."

"You'll always have my love, Madge."

"What about the marrying?"

"Oh, damn it all! what am I to do, Margaret? Can ye forget last week, the day I came back from the Agricultural College? You know what I mean, but I'll tell you again. When my father hinted to me about Lizzie Drummond, I told him that I thought little of her and that neither here

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nor anywhere else had I seen any girl to compare with Margaret Gray. You would think it was a badger snapping at a dog's snout, the way he said, 'Keep your idle tongue off Margaret Gray.' I was wild at that, an' flung back, 'Well, if Margaret's your ward, she's my cousin. But, anyhow, she's my fancy, an' there's an end to't.' At that the old man grew as white as Whitelaf's belly here, an' said never a word for minute after minute. An' when he spoke, it was cauld kail i' the way o' comfort, as the saying is."

"What did he say?"

"Tuts, Madge, you know fine. Well, let me see now; he said this: 'I tell ye, James, I'd rather see ye dead than think o' marriage with Margaret. Marry Miss Drummond; that's my will for ye. But I warn ye that if ye put lips to any other woman hereaway, an' above all on my charge Margaret Gray, I'll cut ye off like a rotten branch; God curse an' . . .' Then wi' that he said never a word more—to me, that is, for he kept his staring old eyes on the Bible he was reading, and I saw his white lips trembling with them prophecies, and lamentations of Isaiah or whatever he was at."

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In the darkness of the byre there was absolute silence for a minute or more, except for the breathing of the kye and the heavy, panting sighs of Whitleaf. In the hot night the close air was like that of a forcing-house. The smell of the cattle, of dung, of the old wood, of all that rotted among the beams and in the thatch, pervaded. The sweat stood on James Ruthven's face. He wondered why it was that Margaret's hand was so cold when his own was clammy and feverish.

At last the girl spoke.

"Well?"

"Can't you say something, Madge?"

"No. I'm waiting to hear what *you* have to say, James."

"One thing you must see as well as I do: that it would be madness to tell the old man how things really are. If he gets wild, as he did at the very thought that I cared for you better than any other girl, what would he be like if he knew that I loved you with all my heart, as you me, my girl?"

Again silence.

"Well?"

The girl's reticence angered the young man. He let go her hand, and kicked

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impatiently the tangled straw at his feet. A gust of wind arose; a blast struck the thatch with a tearing sound. Some rats scurried away, alarmed. Then, as suddenly, the eddy passed. The hot, damp atmosphere felt hotter and damper. A gnat made an irritating, continuous ping. Against the little cobwebbed square of glass a jenny-long-legs wavered in a thin ceaseless crackling; it was as though it danced on the nerves of those who heard.

Ruthven put forward his arm. His hand touched the full, firm bosom of the girl. He slipped his hand to her throat and undid the top button. He felt the warmth of the sudden flush, as the startled blood swung from her heart to her face.

Silently Margaret put away his hand, as though she brushed aside a wandering feather or fluff of hair. She refastened the button, and imperceptibly held herself more aloof.

"James dear," she said quietly, and ignoring what had happened, "what is to be done?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

The voice was sullen, but she ignored that

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too. Leaning forward, she kissed him lightly; but in that lingering moment the flame relit. Ruthven snatched her hand, pressed it against his mouth, cooled his hot lips against it, hated its whiteness and coldness, loved its whiteness, its coldness; knew that by day it was coarsened and reddened by farm toil, and yet that it was fair and comely, and loved and hated it for being both, and loved and hated her, himself, her quiet love for him, his hot love for her.

It was a moment's fever. It sank, to rise again.

"James, there's your father; there's Miss Drummond; there's me. We are all three waiting for you to say the last word."

For a second the young man thought she spoke literally—that the others were there. He started, laughed nervously, abruptly lit a match, stared at the white face, so comely and strong, saw two dark-blue-eyes looking into his, a tangle of thick, wavy, upcoiled hair, of the living rich brown of burn-water, and . . . darkness again.

"I love *you*, Madge—I needn't tell you that now; though if it's as sweet for you to hear as for me to say it, I'll say it over an'

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over. I don't want to leave Silence Farm, as it's well called—an' no wonder, by God! —I say I don't want to leave Silence Farm, an' a beggar at that; and I don't want to leave the old man. But if he'll give up pressing me about that Drummond girl, an' leave me alone, I'll say nothing more at present."

"Mr. Ruthven spoke to me to-day about my leaving."

The young man gave a low whistle of surprise.

"Well, I'm . . . But, I say, Madge, why 'Mr. Ruthven'? What's come to you, my lass? You haven't stopped calling the old man Uncle Archibald, have you?"

"He isn't really my uncle, James—you know that."

"No, I don't know it. I am sure he is. I've always believed so. Your being his ward doesn't mean you're not his niece. But, any way, you've always called him Uncle Archibald."

"It doesn't matter much. Perhaps it was because what he said to me made me think of him more as Mr. Ruthven, of Silence Farm, than as Uncle Archibald."

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"What did he say?"

"He wants me to leave farm service, or his service, and even the house, and to go away to earn my living and 'better myself.' He says he knows of a place in Falkirk."

"It's a crying shame to bring you up as you have been, and then to send you out to service, I'm damned if it isn't! I can't have that. I see it all: it's to keep you out of my way. But I can't have that—no, by God! I can't have that; I'd rather leave first. No, Margaret, dear lass; we'll go together."

For the first time the girl seemed moved; he heard her breath catch. Her hand, which he had taken again, trembled in his clasp. A sudden warmth came into it; he could feel the quickened pulse.

She leaned and kissed his mouth. Her lips thrilled him as they met his for a moment.

Suddenly he was conscious of a strange tremor. The blood congested in his throat, at his heart, in his head. The warm smell of the animals, the heavy thunderous air without, the sultry atmosphere within, intoxicated him.

He was about to whisper through the

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hoarseness which half suffocated him, when, for a second, the byre was illuminated. The kye stood or lay ; Whiteleaf was sprawling on her heaving side ; the roosting hens were motionless, but their unscaled eyes glittered like beads. Ruthven saw Margaret's face, white, intent, transformed ; she saw his, and her woman's heart sank and rose, throbbed and leaped.

A second, and then darkness again ; another second, a down-splitting crash shook all those quiet lives in the byre into a breathless suspense. Some of the cows scrambled to their feet ; others lowed in fright ; the fowls scattered cackling, or scraped and fought as they huddled closer.

Had she fallen there ? Had she come as water into water, as a shadow into the gloaming ? . . . Confusedly James Ruthven wondered thus, as he clasped Margaret close to his breast, and felt the warmth of her body against him, and her breath fanning his face with little, swift, intoxicating, sudden airs. Her heart leaped like a trapped bird. He pressed her closer : below the white cotton blouse her warm bosom was like a lifting wave.

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A sudden rush of rain swept the byres. A million-stringed whip lashed the stone walls, the outer rafters, the loose thatch. At once the roof-runnels filled. A sound of pouring, of dripping, of a flurried splashing, was almost simultaneous.

Ruthven shook as any of the elms beyond Silence Farm would be shaking then, as he held Margaret to his straining breast, and with his right hand unconsciously moved her head backwards, kissing her swiftly again and again.

The girl sighed, with almost passionless inertness. She heard his sobbing breath as he kissed her lips, her neck, the hollow of her throat.

Was it because of another lift of lightning or of another fire, new-litten, that he caught the gleam of her eyes? It was there, and was gone. His voice, whispering nothing, nothing, nothing, shook like the last-whirled leaf on a poplar. His hand shook like a leaf before an eddy; his body was like grass in the wind.

The labouring cow groaned heavily, with low, broken moans. Dead silence had come again, without, within, only that moaning,

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those many breathings that were as one, the low resumed, slurch of the chewing cuds. There was nothing 'else that either heard, save the beating in the ears of each of the heart of each.'

"Madge!" :

Had she ever heard him call her so before? It was a new voice, terrible, sweet, fearful.

"*Madge! . . . Madge! . . . Madge!*"

Suddenly the girl struggled from his grasp.

"Hush! there's the mastiff baying. Sandy must be coming, or . . . or . . . your father. It's for Whiteleaf. Quick! quick! slip out by the other door. Yes . . . yes . . . I'll see you again . . . later . . . to-morrow . . . yes, to-night if possible. . . . Go . . . go, James dear—go, darling, go!"

Ruthven hesitated; then, snatching a hurried, feverish kiss, he slipped past where Whiteleaf sprawled in the straw, undid the latch of the farther door of the byres, and passed into the darkness.

But it was a false alarm; no one came. Margaret went to the little window, and lit the wick of an oil cruse. A prolonged, heavy sigh startled her. Glancing across her shoulder, she saw the extended hind-legs

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of Whiteleaf stiffen. The next moment she leaned above the poor beast. The cow was dead. •The eyes were still moist and shadowy violet, but the tongue was protruded, and the teeth met upon it halfway.

“Ah, poor Whiteleaf! poor Whiteleaf!” she muttered, struggling against the sob in her throat; “an’ your first calf, too.”

She pressed her hands against the still flanks. The calf, too, was dead. She had heard that a sudden thunder-burst sometimes kills the unborn on the verge of birth. Perhaps both lives had gone away in that same moment, in that long sighing she had been startled by.

She leaned over and kissed the white leaf-shaped spot on the forehead of the still mother. A tear rolled down her cheek. Then, slowly, having thrown some straw over the staring eyes, she went to the eastern door of the byre, opened it, passed out, and closed the door again.

The storm had already travelled northward. A wet, uncertain sheen strayed from the south-east, where the moonlight was all but obscured by heavy masses of vapour. South-westward, westward, overhead, the

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sky was clear. The stars, moistly luminous, became more and more frequent.

Far away she could hear a faint sighing. It was the wind—a tempest, there.

All around her was a profound, an absolute silence; even the frogs croaked no more. The rain had dispersed the gnats and midges.

She waited for a step. There was none. For a long while she listened to that far surf of wind breaking the boughs and branches of Muirton Woods, faint as the sighing in a shell; then fainter, till less than her own silent breathing.

The stars crowded silently into the night. The interminable moors were like a sea, stilled into one limitless wave.

The girl turned and walked slowly to the tiled dairy-way, and thence, silently and unobserved, entered the house.

Chapter II

THE long Sabbath was over. Silence Farm was even more silent than usual —the more so as house and outer servants were gone, some to the Muir Kirk, some to visit neighbours or meet friends.

Rain and wind had filled the day, till the late afternoon ; then a spell of clear weather had come, wherein the wind turned upon itself, went away northward, and at nightfall came back the way of the Brown Dykes, the great stony ridge of hills which rise out of the moors, a mile or two north-eastward of Silence Farm. It brought with it a colder air, and the smell of coming rain.

When the gloaming deepened, a rising and falling ever-quavering fount of light welled into it from the blindless window of the parlour. Within, a bright fire of peat and wood gave a look of warmth, almost of cheerfulness, to the austere, furnished room. Blending with it was the dull yellow

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gleam of an oil-lamp, which stood on a circular table covered with a red crumb-cloth, beside which Archibald Ruthven sat, in a shouldered armchair, with his big Bible open before him.

At the other side of the table, on a horse-hair sofa, his son James lay smoking and staring into the fire.

Now and again the young man glanced at his father. The laird was a tall, powerfully-built but gaunt man of about five-and-fifty. He looked at least five years older, partly because of his long gray hair, which in patches was of a bleached white. Once, when he looked up, the unchanging coal-black eyes added to the sternness of the face, rugged, heavily lined, carved out of moor granite, it seemed, clay-like in its pallor, with vivid scarlet lips compressed to a firm, relentless, dogged mouth. The man had always more or less of a frozen look about him. There was little sign of nervous life, except in the long-fingered and, for a man such as himself, strangely white and delicate hands, with their supple thumbs, flexible, emotional. On his forehead there was a blue vein which always stood out, like a rib of fluor-spar in rock, and, when he was angered

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or excited, tightened like a strained cord in which something lived and quivered. That vein, those white alive hands with their long talon-like fingers, that heavily scarred and moulded death-white face with its scarlet lips —red as poppies slit by a cart-wheel in the dust of the highway—how well James Ruthven knew them! How could father and son be so unlike, he wondered. At the thought, he glanced at the gilt-edged, time-worn mirror which hung above the mantelpiece, partially blocked by a tomb-like clock of black marble. He saw there youthful handsome features only vaguely reminiscent of that older, red-lipped, death pale, rugged face. He saw dark hair close clustering to a comely head; brown, smiling eyes, with dark, heavily-arched eyebrows; bright-coloured tanned cheeks, with full-nostrilled nose, and a somewhat large, loose-lipped, but not unpleasant mouth.

"I'm more a credit to him than he to me," he muttered below his breath, with a satisfied smile, adding, in unspoken thought, "I wonder what the old man's reading. Some of those bitter old prophecies, I'll be bound, with more curses than blessings to the acre."

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He stared curiously. Almost for the first time he saw a look of suffering or of inward disquiet on his father's face : certainly it was for the first time that he saw what seemed like a tear, trickling from furrow to furrow down that white face till it reached the upper scarlet lip and hung there like a drop of sweat.

"What are you reading, father?" he asked.

"The Book o' Samuel," Archibald Ruthven answered harshly, and without glancing from the page. Then, abruptly, he began to read aloud, his voice hard, harsh, like coarse metal in its resonance :

"For I swear by the Lord, if thou go not forth, that it will be worse unto thee than all the evil that hath befallen thee from thy youth until now."

Archibald Ruthven still kept his gaze on the open Bible, and nothing more was said for some minutes. James lay looking at his father. The dancing fire-flauchs made the pallor of the old man's face whiter than its wont, and the scarlet lips redder.

The wet hill-wind moaned without. There was no other sound. Sometimes a charred log gave way, and made a momentary

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welcome noise. The heavy, slow ticking of the clock was not sound, but the pulse of silence.

“ Father !”

“ Well ?”

“ What was the text you were turning over before what you read out just now ?”

“ I was reading the song that David sang when he was delivered out of the hands of Saul and all his enemies.”

“ I have forgotten.”

Archibald Ruthven lifted his head, and the deep coal-black eyes with the strange streak of red in them were fixed upon his son.

“ Did you ever know ?” he said scornfully.

“ Yes. An’ by the same token, is not this from it ?” And with that James Ruthven took a slip of paper from his pocket and read :

“ As a morning without clouds, when the tender grass springeth out of the earth, through clear shining after rain : Verily my house is not so with God.”

“ Where did you find that ?”

“ The paper blew out of your bedroom window yesterday. I picked it up and forgot to give it to you. Mr Murray read that

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very chapter o' Second Samuel at the kirk a Sabbath or two back, and so I knew it."

"Give it me."

James handed the slip to his father, who glanced at it, and then slowly tore the paper into small fragments. The old man rose, went to the window, and stared into the night.

Ruthven leaned from the sofa and silently pulled the Bible towards him, where he could see the words. It was open at 2 Samuel, but all he noticed were several passages deeply underscored in the red ink his father used for his farm transactions.

"What shall I do for you? and wherein shall I make atonement?"

"Oh that He would give me water to drink of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!"

"I have sinned greatly in that I have done; but now, O Lord, put away, I beseech thee, the iniquity of Thy servant."

"And David said unto God, I am in a great strait; let us fall now into the hand of the Lord: for His mercies are great; and let me not fall into the hand of man . . . the Lord repented Himself of the evil, and said to the

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angel that destroyed . . . It is enough: now stay thy hand."

Suddenly Archibald Ruthven turned.

"What are you reading there, James?" he asked harshly.

The young man hesitated a moment.

"Nothing. I was just looking. My eye caught some words, an' I've been reading them over."

A look of extraordinary eagerness came into the white face. The eyes gleamed.

"Is it peace?"

"What?"

"Is it peace? Is it for peace, James? Are ye doited, man? What are the words ye have fallen upon? They say God guides the witless."

James frowned, sullenly resumed his pipe, and shoved the Bible from him.

The old man stooped and looked at the page.

"Tell me," he said sternly, "which are the words?"

"The seventeenth verse—an' much obliged to you for your compliment about the witless."

Mr. Ruthven went back to his armchair at

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the other side of the table. He pulled the book towards him, and read :

"Lo; I have sinned, and I have done perversely: but these sheep, what have they done? Let Thine hand, I pray Thee, be against me and against my father's house."

His son was startled by a sound as of a stifled gasp or sob. He turned his head and stared. His father's hand shook like a leaf. Unmistakable tears rolled from his eyes.

"Father! Sir!"

But in a moment the weakness was gone. Mr. Ruthven lifted his white face, wherein all seemed dead save the intense eyes and the painfully vivid scarlet lips.

"Well?"

"I thought you were . . . I thought . . . I thought, perhaps, you were ill."

"You thought wrong."

"I hope my saying anything about that verse hasn't hurt you?"

"What verse?"

"That seventeenth verse, about 'Lo, I have sinned,' and 'these sheep, what have they done?' "

"I have not read it. I was thinking of other things."

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James knew that his father lied, but he said nothing more.

Again the old dreary silence. The younger man threw more wood on the fire, replenished his pipe, and lay back again. Outside, the wet hill-wind had a louder sough in it. Momentary whip-like lashes of rain struck the windows at long intervals. Nearly an hour passed, before, abruptly, Mr. Ruthven closed the Bible. For long he had not read; for long, as in a trance, his eyes had dreamed against the words he had last repeated.

"Where is Margaret?" he asked.

"She's at the kirk," James answered taciturnly.

"It's time she was in. It's a "coarse night."

The young man made no reply, but he looked at the black marble timepiece, as though the best answer could be had from there.

Before more was said the door opened and a clumsy, rough-featured, red-faced, red-handed farm-girl entered, lifted the lamp, and spread a coarse cloth across the table. Then, clattering the dishes she had left on the tray in the passage, she laid out the

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supper of cold beef, bread and cheese, and ale.

The two men drew chairs to the table, helped themselves to what they wanted, and ate in silence. Now the elder, now the younger, glanced at the clock, but neither spoke of Margaret, though she was in the thoughts of each.

When the cheerless meal was over, both turned their chairs to the fire, and each lit a churchwarden and smoked silently.

At last Mr. Ruthven spoke. Even if he had not heard the words, James would have known that his father spoke of farm or other business matters, for invariably then, in intonation if not in words, he fell into a broader Scots.

“The farm-lands o’ Heatherton Ha’ are free now. I saw that haverin’ Martin Comyn about them yesterday. Ye couldna have a better chance.”

James gave no response. Filling his pipe anew, he lit it and stared into the fire idly, as though he had not heard, had nothing to consider, nothing to reply.

Mr. Ruthven made a gesture of impatience, but controlled himself.

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"Well, are ye deaf or dumb, or both?" he asked grimly after a little.

His son slowly took the long clay pipe from his lips, and was about to answer, when the front-door was heard to open and shut again.

Both men, unnoticed of each other, waited eagerly. But Margaret did not come to the sitting-room; they heard her steps as she went straight to her room up the wooden, creaky stairs. Both relapsed into sullen silence, the elder seemingly having forgotten his unanswered question.

James fidgeted, then rose.

"The new brown cow calved to-day; I'll just look in at the byres to see how she is."

With these words he left the room. His father sat upright awhile, listening. He heard the door open and shut. James had not gone upstairs, nor had Margaret come down.

For long he sat brooding. Ten struck. At that hour he went each night to bed; but to-night he sat staring into the waning fire, noticing neither the perishing flame nor the ashening peats, till midnight struck.

He rose with a start, for the room was in

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darkness. The lamp also had flared itself out, leaving a heavy, acrid smell. Against the window the rain rushed in sudden flurries. The cry of the wind filled the melancholy darkness.

Chapter III

WHEN James Ruthven left the house, he went to the byres. There was no one there. He looked, called twice: the first time . . . “Is anyone here?” . . . the next . . . “ Margaret !”

It had been wet and raw outside when he came out of the warm parlour, but here it was warm again, though only with the steamy warmth which holds a chill for the feet and head. The heat was from the close air, from the breaths and moist skins of the cows, from the dung, from the heavy-smelling straw.

He listened awhile to the monotonous chewing of the cud, to the occasional movement of leg or long tail or restless head. Then he struck a match, and lit a coarse, rank-smelling dip. The fowls roosting in the rafters fluttered uneasily, but soon dozed off again; some of the kye turned their heads, staring with wide, velvety eyes. The last

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cow which had calved began an anxious licking of her huddled, ungainly offspring, as though by this protective care to ward some possible harm. The rats squeaked and scurried among the straw.

James lit his pipe and leaned against the window-ledge. The dip guttered, flared, and sank into a noisome flame, become blood-red through the acrid smoke.

An hour passed. Once he took his watch from his vest-pocket, and looked at it in the flare of a match: later, he heard eleven strike from the big clock in the stable-yard; now, when he looked at his watch, he saw that it was past the quarter.

He turned and walked uncertainly towards the door, muttering an angry curse as his left foot slipped in the byre-gutter. In a wanton resentment he kicked a cow drowsing on her side; when the startled beast stumbled afoot, he struck her again and again heavily on the flank with his open palm.

One, two, several of the kye staggered to their feet. One began a convulsive coughing. A querulous, whimpering half-lowing wavered along the byre. Ruthven went to Black Susan, the cow which had a rasping

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cough, and struck her on the neck with his fist. Outside in the yard a dog barked, howled then began a prolonged regular baying.

"Curse it!" the young man muttered. "What the devil is all this noise for? Damn the bitch! she's well called Kelpie, wi' that yawping howl. I must stop that."

He hushed the kye with a loud, angry sound; then opened the door and moved hurriedly into the yard. Kelpie ceased baying when she recognised him, and, as he came near, leaped to and fro with sudden tail-switching crouches. The rattling and clanging of the mastiff's chain drew from him another imprecation.

The great, gaunt bitch was soon quieted. Ruthven stood by her awhile, patting her head. A sudden clang behind him told that the half-hour had passed. He walked slowly back, but did not enter the byres again. Through a rift in the low mass of vapour he could see three stars. One grew dim and blurred, then another, then the third. A clammy drizzle began again. A prolonged sighing came from the moorland; it was not the wind, for the fitful rain-blasts had ceased,

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and all was still. The wilderness, like a dead-calm sea, at times breathes audibly.

Ruthven lit a match, but dropped it with a start, as a white blur shot by in the darkness. The next moment he heard the hoot of the barn-owl. Again he lit a match, and caught a glimpse of his watch ; it was all but a quarter from twelve.

He turned and moved swiftly towards the house, but took the curving, laurel-bushed pathway which led to the outer dairy and to the garden at the back. When he reached the garden he avoided the gravel path, and walked hesitatingly and carefully along a tangled border of old grass and tufts of London-pride. Once he fancied he heard a sound coming from beyond the front of the house. He stopped, though he had at that moment trodden on a small bush of wall-flowers. The swift poignant smell rose like invisible smoke, and filled his nostrils. All his life he remembered that nocturnal odour of crushed wall-flowers.

The back of the house was in darkness, except at one window, where a lamp-flame illumined a crimson blind. For some minutes he stared at this red blind as though fascinated.

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There was no shadow on it: no one was near or moved within. Ruthven stooped and plucked some wall-flower sprays, knotted them, and threw the missile against the crimson blind. It fell short.

Kelpie, the mastiff bitch, growled, gave a short bark, growled again.

"Damn the beast!" Ruthven muttered. "There's no one here but myself. What's the bitch snarling at? But *am* I alone? Perhaps the shepherd's prowling about, or one of the farm-folk's late or up to mischief."

He waited, motionless as a tree-shadow. Some minutes passed. There was not a sound. The barn-owl hawked in a wide circuit, hooting forlornly at long intervals. With a sudden, startling clang, twelve struck from the stable-yard clock.

In the room with the crimson blind someone stirred. A shadow, peaked and fantastic, shot across it, widened, contracted, darted into the wall darkness. But no one came to the window; the crimson blind remained unlifted, unmoved.

The watcher silently moved from off the wall-flowers, and slipped across the gravel on

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to the loose end of a strip of washing green. Like a dark blur in the shadow, a rain-barrel rose at the extreme end of this, and abutted against the house. A whetstone stood near ; a disused hoe and rake ledge ran parallel with the upper half of the tall barrel. It did not take Ruthven more than a few seconds to step from the whetstone to the ledge, and thence to raise and quietly drag himself on to the strong, flat, wooden board which covered the barrel-top.

When he stood on this board he could lean his arms on the ledge of the window with the crimson blind. He waited a few moments, listening intently, his head turned towards the byres.

Then slowly he tapped at the window. There was a movement within ; the light disappeared. The blind, now an obscure, uncertain shadow, moved, jerked, was slowly upraised.

Ruthven tapped again. A white face, shrouded in long sheaves of hair, appeared against the glass. When a hand rose waveringly in the darkness without, the white face abruptly drew back, as though startled by a flittering bat. Then the

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window quietly opened a little, then further, then to the mid-sill.

Margaret!"

"James! . . . James—oh, James, is that you?"

"Yes. Hush, dear! . . . Madge, where is your hand? . . . Give it me. . . . Ah, that's right!"

The young man drew the girl's hand to his stooping face, where it lay passive against his hot lips; but when their silence became a loud whisper in her heart, the blood flushed her to the eyes, and she made an effort to withdraw.

"Ah, Madge, let me keep it, dear—let me keep it . . . dear little hand! My girl, I love you . . . I love you . . . I love you!"

"Hush, Jim!" Margaret whispered, trembling. "Speak low; I am frightened."

"At what?"

"I don't know. Hush! . . . I'm sure I heard a step . . . or . . . or . . . something!"

"Nonsense, dear lass! Madge . . . Madge . . . let me come in. . . . Dear girl, yes, yes, Madge darling, let me come in. . . . I long to hold you in my arms. . . . Just one kiss, sweetheart! . . . I won't stay if you don't

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want me to . . . but yes, Madge—Madge dear, do let me come in!"

The girl did not answer, but she withdrew her hand, and pressed it firmly against his breast.

"Madge dear, Maggie, my own dear girl, you know how I love you! Let me in, dear. . . . You won't keep me out here when my heart's breaking for love of you. . . . Only a kiss, my girl . . . one kiss with you in my arms, an' then I'll go!"

Margaret leaned and kissed Ruthven on the brow.

"Go, dear. I have much to say to you, but I cannot speak to you to-night. James, if you really love me, go! You do me wrong even now; and I, too, am doing wrong. No, no, no! don't be impatient or bitter. I know what I am saying. I am not a silly, ignorant girl, James! And if I, too, love you as you love me . . . well, I know what love is. I'm afraid of it, though I'm not afraid of you. But go now, dear. I'll see you to-morrow whenever you like. . . . I'll be in the dairy before breakfast if you like . . . or . . . or . . . any time, anywhere."

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Unwittingly, as she leaned and whispered eagerly, she let her long hair fall forward on either side of her white face. The dark fragrant masses hung warm to Ruthven's shoulders ; his ears tingled with their touch ; the pulse in his neck throbbed ; on quivering lip and flushed cheek that magic rain seemed to have cries in it, tears and vague bewildering voices, and little, sudden, perplexing cries, infinitely strange and sweet.

"It's only a farm-girl's hair," he thought cynically to himself, "and yet I don't know whether I'm in heaven or hell because of it."

Then aloud, in a hoarse whisper, he pleaded again :

"Margaret, it's like wine . . . I'm drunk with you. My girl, don't deny me. Margaret, you've never yet told me you really love me. How do I know you're not playing with me ? By God ! girl, I'm in earnest. I love you—I love you ! I . . . what's that you say, Madge ?"

"What about Miss Drummond ?"

"I've told you already : I'll give her up. I never cared for her."

Margaret smiled scornfully, but Ruthven could not see her face in the shadow of he

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hair, which she had upgathered, and held with one hand against her neck.

"I'm not jealous, James. If you care for me above all else, then I'm the woman of your love and of your life; and if you don't, then it may be Lizzie Drummond or anyone else so far as I'm concerned. But I say again, what about your father's determination that you're to wed Miller Drummond's daughter? He's not the man to give way; and what can you do?"

"I'm not the man to give way, either, Madge."

The girl leaned lower again, and stared into the shining eyes which desire made bright as stars in the dusk.

It was only a moment. In the obscure void, where only a few distorted or massed shadows leaned out of the darkness, the hooting of the barn-owl fell, a disconsolate, mourning voice. But at that moment, when the outer eyes were dimmed with darkness, and the ears heard only the forlorn cry of a nocturnal bird, Margaret Gray saw clearly with the inward eyes.

But she said nothing. Her life had long been a silent one, and her thoughts, whether

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things of the moment or themselves the fringes of thought, were wrought in silence, and passed into and became part of the inward or outward life, as the need called.

Without a word, without a gesture, she answered Ruthven's plea. He understood that the girl would not yield. But the implicit reason angered him. Still, he thought, if he waited, a moment would come again. Instinct told him that the male will is a drowning flood. She might evade, she could not long escape it.

For a brief while they talked in low voices. The casual eddies of moaning wind passed into a continuous sough. His quick ears could hear the thin sound of it in an elm, the deeper monotone in a near oak. The rain had ceased. The smell of it, and the indiscriminate wet sound, came from the saturated leaves, from the sodden lilacs and laurels. In frequent patches, groups of stars shone dully and apparently along the elm-ridges, so near and low were they to the eye.

When, even for a moment, pebbles crunch with a downward sound, it means that no prowling animal, wild or domestic, has caused it.

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Both heard the sound. They listened, hand clasped in hand, but the silence was filled only with the sough of the wind.

"Go, James. It is already far too late. Dear, you should not have come to me thus—but no, the fault is mine. It shall not be again. Yes . . . yes . . . I will kiss you . . . there . . . go now, dear . . . yes . . . yes, to-morrow——"

With that Margaret drew back. He saw her white face amid its shadowy masses of hair; her tall, erect figure, with the firm bosom, broad and strong; and then her uplifted white arm, as she raised it to pull down the blind.

For a moment all was blank; simply another shadow had come into the shadowiness.

Within, Margaret lit a candle. The crimson blind was illumined again, as though it bled at the heart. Suddenly the light was extinguished.

Slowly and carefully Ruthven lowered himself from the barrel-top to the hoe-ledge, and thence to the whetstone, whence he stepped lightly to the ground. Then, stealthily, he made his way along the grass borders.

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A hunting weasel would hardly have moved more silently.

Once he stopped. He looked up at the dark window. A red gleam stole into a portion of the blind. What did it mean? Was Margaret in bed, reading? He was tempted to return. This time he would not be repulsed. He muttered something below his breath, kissed his hand towards his desire, and moved silently away.

When James Ruthven came to the angle of the house, he hesitated. There was a lilac-bush at the corner, and he fancied he heard a cat in it, or perhaps a rabbit. He listened. Perhaps a bird breathed or field-mouse panted; there was no more sound than that.

A weight went from his heart. With a sigh of relief he stepped into the shadow of the corner.

Could darkness fall? Out of the black obscurity something dark sprang upon him. With a gasp he reeled, uttered a low cry like a hare, then with swift, desperate rage struggled with the man who had sprung upon him.

They fought in terrible, silent fury. Not

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a word passed ; the gasping breath was like a savage disordered pulse beating in the night. The writhing bodies intertwined, hands grappling for the other's throat. Once, close to his own, Ruthven had a blurred glimpse of a white face : it was white as death. A new terror tore at the snapping cords of his heart.

With a despairing effort he tried to overbear his assailant. But he had been taken at a disadvantage. The man, too, was taller than himself—stronger, perhaps ; yet, as he fought for his life, Ruthven realized that his mysterious foe was not so lithe as himself. It was a chance. He relaxed, slipped, twisted, and in a moment wound himself round the legs of the other. Then with all his strength he tore the feet from the ground and sent the man sidelong with a crash.

He might then and there have ended the matter, but that a heavily-shod foot struck him like a mallet at the side of his head. The night swam before him, stars falling from shadowy trees like wind-scattered fruit. As though it were an infinite distance away, he heard a stumbling, rushing sound. He

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put out his arms, feeling aimlessly with impotent hands. Almost simultaneously he was aware that a fierce grip had got him by the throat. He saw a white splash that was a face, and then the stars whirled above him like a juggler's balls. With a cry he made a desperate clutch. He caught someone, something. Then, in a moment, the sky and the world collapsed, darkness rose like a welling flood, and he knew no more.

Chapter IV

WHEN Ruthven stirred, with the pain of chilled blood cramping his limbs, and with his head aching as though he were recovering from a heavy drinking-bout, he could not think at first where he was. That he lay on the floor or on the ground he knew; then gradually he realized that he was on the path at the side of Silence Farm. With that realization there came an earlier memory. Had he fallen in a fit on his way from the byres, or after he had left Margaret at her bedroom window? Had he fallen on his way back? Had he . . .

Just then he heard among the oats near by the squeaking of a rabbit pursued by a stoat. The circling trail must have been complete, for the next moment he heard a quavering cry. Then there was silence again.

For some minutes he lay, vaguely listening, indolently trying to think.

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As the chill twilight grew grayer he stirred uneasily. Was he dreaming, he wondered? Suddenly he remembered all: the crimson blind, Margaret, her hands, her lips, her fragrant falling hair, her cold refusal of him, their startled parting—and then, in a bewildering flash, that sudden, mysterious attack in the darkness of the shadow of the house.

With that memory he strove to move. How weak he was he realized, too numbed and deathly weak to struggle afoot. Was he hurt, stabbed, perhaps at death's door? he wondered. But after a slow pressing of his hands here and there he knew that he was only stiff and weak, though heavily bruised, and with his head aching as though it were about to break under the heavy mallet whirling within it.

Who was his mysterious assailant? Who could he be . . . and where was he now? . . . was he dead? Was he . . .

And at that thought he raised himself and leaned on his right elbow, and through moist swimming vision stared about him. There was no one. The trim border by the house-wall was torn and scattered, and there were

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other signs of the fierce struggle; but as there was no one there beside himself, it was clear that his assailant had not been seriously hurt, or at least had got clean away.

Who could it be, he wondered? Was it some burglar or wayside thief, or perhaps some tinker or gipsy after the poultry? Or could it have been Matthew Black, the constable? . . . No, he would not have attacked with such fury, and in absolute silence.

Was the assailant a young man or an elderly one? He could not be sure, but fancied the scoundrel was no youngster. Tall and powerful he certainly was, but it was strength and fury rather than agility he had shown, and Ruthven remembered that when he threw his savage antagonist the man had fallen like a falling tree, stiffly and with a heavy crash.

Yet, of course, it might well be a young man. Perhaps one of the dairy girls had a lover. But why that wanton, savage, and unprovoked attack? Possibly, he thought, Aggie or one of the other lasses had a sweetheart, and this sweetheart had a rival, who had come to settle matters in the old best-man-wins way. With the thought another

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idea came into Ruthven's mind. He frowned. Had Margaret Gray another lover? Like enough.

Who could it be? Why, of course there was Will Johnstone. He was unmarried, and had long admired Margaret. True, he had not enough to marry on till old Johnstone died, and he hale and prosperous, and Will was rather a wastrel; but he was a well-set-up and comely lad. Johnstone was the taller, too; with curly brown hair, a bright, healthy complexion, and laughing blue eyes. It might well be that Margaret had liked his attentions, his courting, perhaps. . . . Why, it might have been Will Johnstone for whom Margaret had waited up so late; it might have been for Will Johnstone that the crimson blind shone through the darkness; it might have been Will Johnstone whom she had hoped to see, and perhaps take to herself; it might have been Will Johnstone who had seen what had happened, had waited for his rival, had made that murderous assault in the darkness!

With a muttered curse Ruthven half rose. Suddenly he stopped, staring. In his right hand, tightly clutched and intertwined among

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his fingers, was a tuft of hair, doubtless plucked from the head of his assailant in that last desperate, throttling grip. He stared bewildered. This was not Will Johnstone's curly, golden-brown hair. It was not that of a young man at all. It was a long tress of iron-gray hair.

Who did he know with hair like that? Of course, it might be a gipsy, a tramp. But there were none on Wardlaw Muir or Muirton way just then that he knew of. And a Sabbath night, too, and after midnight! Besides, to what end, for what reason, could there be any such attack, unless from a madman? Who could it be . . . where had he seen hair like that of late?

Suddenly his breath caught, and a flush crimsoned, and as rapidly ebbed from, his haggard face. With painful but swift effort he rose, his knees trembling slightly as he stood.

"My God!" he whispered.

With bloodshot eyes and wan face James Ruthven stood awhile pondering, sometimes staring at the blank west wall of the house, sometimes looking at the tress of iron-gray hair as one might look at an adder. At last,

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with an abrupt movement he unwound the hair from his middle fingers, put it carefully into an envelope in his pocket, and moved slowly along the path which led to the front of the house.

When he looked at the door it was closed. He tried the handle, but the door was locked from within ; by the single shake he gave to it he knew that it was barred also.

Puzzled, he stood uncertain. With a furtive glance about him he took out the envelope from his breast-pocket, and stared again at the gray lock of hair.

Stepping back on to the edge of the circular grass lawn in front of the house, he looked up at the window of his father's room. The window was closed, and the drab cotton blind shrouded it within. For some minutes James stood staring intently, as though he expected his father to come to the window.

Then stealthily he approached the ground-floor window of the parlour. He remembered he had not fastened the snib again when he had opened the window to see if the rain had ceased. Possibly he might now enter the house that way unobserved.

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The window was fastened. With a stifled oath he turned, and walked slowly towards the byres. It would at least be warmer there.

Indeed, it was pleasant to have the comfortable neighbourhood of the beasts. The kye were up, ready for the new day. He leaned against Sunbeam, a great tawny cow of a southland breed, glad of the warmth that came from her. He lit his pipe and smoked. At last a heavy drowsiness came over him, and having coaxed Sunbeam to lie down again, he threw himself beside her and was soon dreamlessly asleep against her flank.

There shortly after sunrise the milk-girls found him, so heavy in his slumber that he neither heard the opening of the byre doors, the clanging of the milk-pails, the voices and laughter of Peggy and Bessie and Jean and the new, gawky, east-country lass Aggie, nor opened his eyes to the sudden streaming glare of the new day.

At last he stirred, then sat up with a sullen frown, as he realized that the farm-girls were making fun of him.

“Hoots, Maister James,” said one of them

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laughingly ; “ I nivver kent ye were sae sair fond o’ the kye !”

“ Weel, for sure, Mr. James, ye’ve had a braw bed the nicht !” laughed another.

“ An’ after the Sawbath, too !” added Aggie with a foolish giggle.

But an awkward silence fell on them when they found that young Ruthven made no answer, but simply stared at them, dazed, dumb.

That he had been drinking heavily and fallen there was the obvious thought which occurred to each ; but slowly it dawned upon each lass that the young master might have had an accident, or might be ill.

His words, when he did speak, satisfied them :

“ Get on wi’ your work, ye lazy huzzies. An’ you there, Aggie, gie me a lift o’ your arm. I was up in the loft to look for something, an’ I had a bad fall in the dark.”

Once on his feet again Ruthven felt better. With the help of Aggie Saunders he got a pail of water and some soap, and by the time the girl brushed his clothes he had washed the dirt and blood from his face and tangled, clotted hair.

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Then a strange shivering fit overcame him, and he sat down on an upturned milk-tub. Jean, a short-kirtled, pink-bloused, strapping lass, with face ruddy as a robin's breast, and with a robin's bright eyes, brought him some warm milk, and in a brief while he was himself again, with little to feel or show as to what he had gone through. After some chaff with the girls, he lit his pipe and walked slowly towards the house. The morning was fresh and clear, and he stopped again and again to draw in a vivifying breath of the keen air which swept the wide moorland region in the midst of which Silence Farm stood. Every leaf, every spire of grass, was washed to a shining green. On tangled dandelions and campions, on every bush and shrub, from branch to branch of the spurge-laurels, the dewy gossamer webs shimmered white.

Before he passed the corner of the laurel-path James turned and looked curiously at the spot of the mysterious encounter of the past night. There were few traces, except to an eye that knew where to look and what to look for. Had anyone been there, tidying the loose gravel, the trampled borders?

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Slowly he walked along the path to the back of the house till he stood among the gooseberry-bushes. He looked up at Margaret's window. It was open, top and bottom, and from where he stood he could see that she was not in the room. She was always an early riser, and he was not surprised ; but he wondered he had not met her in the byres, for she supervised the milking.

When he reached the front of the house again the door was open. He entered and passed into the parlour, where an awkward lout of a house-girl was setting the breakfast, and removing some already-used dishes.

A note was on the table, addressed to him. It was in Margaret's writing. He almost feared to open it. It was with a sigh of relief, if also with some chagrin, that he found the note was only to say that she had already breakfasted, and had gone to Moss Dykes to see old Dickson the shepherd, who was ailing badly. There were a few almost illegible words after the initial "M." James held them to the light and gave an impatient sigh as he read that they could not meet just yet, alone ; that, indeed, Margaret did not

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wish to meet him yet. "We have both much to think of" were the last words.

With a discontented frown the young man crumpled the note, and threw it on the dull, smoke-choked fire. Then, turning to the table, he ate and drank hurriedly, hungrily, but without relish, with eyes constantly seeking the clock. When he had finished, he crossed to the chair before the fire, and lit his pipe.

He had just seated himself, when he heard a heavy step overhead. With a quick gesture he drew the envelope from his breast-pocket, and starèd eagerly at the lock of iron-gray hair ; replaced that, and the other, as he heard the heavy step coming down the wooden stairs ; and, when his father entered, was sitting with his back to the door, smoking, and holding before him a copy of a local agricultural news-sheet.

Mr. Ruthven glanced at his son as he came in. The latter could see him in the mirror, but he could not see his son's face. James noted how death-white the old man was—for to-day he seemed old—taller, too, and more angular ; and that but for the scarlet lips and the intense eyes, he would appear lifeless.

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"Good-morning," Mr. Ruthven said coldly, in a low voice.

"Good-morning," James answered, without stirring or looking from his paper. As a rule, his father was punctilious, and he was surprised at no notice of his courtesy.

Mr. Ruthven ate in moody silence. When done, he pushed the plate and cup from him, and stared at the play of the flickering sunlight as it streamed through the fern-pattern of one of the muslin hangings at the window.

Once he glanced furtively at his son. James had shifted his position, and now both were mirrored in the mantel-glass. Their eyes met. In a second they fell away again.

James knocked the ash from his pipe, threw the paper aside, and rose.

Was he going to speak? Mr. Ruthven sat, staring before him, with a face as emotionless as gray granite.

After a hoarse clearing of his throat James stirred awkwardly.

With a furtive glance, Mr. Ruthven rose. The blood-red lips broke the silence of his frozen face, but his son could not catch what he said. It sounded like one of those texts

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that had been marked in red ink in the big Bible :

"It is enough : now stay thine hand."

"What? . . . I didn't hear," he asked roughly.

Mr. Ruthven looked at him steadily.

"What's the matter with you, James? You could not have been drinking last night—and it the Sabbath, too? You do not look yourself. And, James, I will trouble you to show me more respect another time. You neither gave me greeting nor looked up when I came in; and your manners since have been those of a spoilt child, though a worse name might be put to it."

"Is that all you have to say, sir?"

"That is all, on that point, for the present. If you give me further occasion, I will have more to say—and then I shall speak once and for all."

"I did not mean to be rude. I've an infernal headache . . . and I've had . . . I've had . . . a bad night. A very strange thing hap . . ."

"Say no more, James. Let be—I understand, and forgive. Perhaps I, too, have shown more irritation than I should have

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done. I have not been very well of late. And I, too, had a bad night."

James Ruthven looked at his father curiously. That gray, rigid, granite face, with its crimson lips and deep, strange, brooding eyes, how impenetrable it was! His gaze wandered swiftly from the worn features to the iron-gray hair which hung in tangled locks about the high forehead.

A frown came into the young man's eyes.

"But . . ."

Mr. Ruthven made an impatient gesture.

"That will do, James; I wish to hear no more on the subject. I have much I wish to talk over and arrange with you later, at some more suitable occasion; but there's pressing farm work and farm business to see to to-day, and we're both late, and beginning the day overleisurely."

"But one moment, sir . . ."

"Did you hear me, James? . . . And now about Drayboro'. There's the sheep on Hundred Acre to be sent into Drayboro' to-day. Peter Scott, the flesher, will tak' them at a word. See to't yourself, James."

With that Mr. Ruthven turned and left the room.

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For a time his son stared gloomily into the fire; then, with a half-angry, half-bewildered sigh, he went to the window and looked out. Rob, the stableman, had brought Mr. Ruthven's roan to the front, and James noticed with what power and alertness his father mounted the great gaunt mare. He watched him ride past the byres and disappear down the cart-road to the right which led to the turnip-fields.

James went into the passage. There was no one in the house except Jessie, the scullery-lass, and old Mrs. Robertson, the cook. He could hear both: one in the kitchen, one noisily washing the dishes.

Quickly mounting the stairs, he opened Margaret's door. The room seemed to him strangely sweet and fair and sacred. He stopped short. The garden-wind played among the white muslin curtains, tied with blue bows, at the head of the bed. A pink blouse, a large cotton field-hat, a pale-blue cotton dress, lay on the bed. On a little table near was a gray-blue jug filled with freshly-gathered wallflowers. Beside it lay a book. He recognised it: it was "Evangeline," which a few days ago he had ordered

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from Edinburgh for Margaret, because she had told him that it was her favourite poem. They had read it together, under the larches beyond the gravel-pit. At the close he had come nearer to understanding of true love than he had ever done before. It was then that for the first time Margaret had voluntarily kissed him.

He went softly forward. Lifting the book, he kissed it. Then with a pencil he wrote on the flyleaf: "To my dear and only love." He put a wallflower spray into the space between the flyleaf and cover, and replaced the book. Stooping, he kissed the pillow where her face, that warm fragrant hair, had lain.

When he rose, his face was flushed.

"Damn the girl!" he muttered; "I'm fair demented wi' her."

A sound below made him start. In the passage he listened, but it was only the house-girl. Passing into his father's room, he looked idly here and there, then more circumspectly. There was nothing unusual to catch his gaze, unless it were the big Bible lying open on the console near the bed.

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After all, he had probably understood aright when he heard his father's muttered words when he had first spoken a little ago. For, when he looked at the open page, his eyes caught the words, underlined in red : *"It is enough : now stay thine hand."*

Chapter V

IT was late in the afternoon before James Ruthven, having disposed of the sheep in Muirton, and left Duncan, the second shepherd, to bring the two black heifers he had bought at Old Lammas Fair, set out for the long moorland tramp to Silence Farm.

Before he left the little gray silent town he had gone to Mr. Flemming, the silversmith, and purchased a ring of small turquoisees set like forget-me-nots. It would please Margaret, he thought, and would be a constant reminder to her of his great love.

"Women are kittle cattle," he muttered; "but, for all that, they like mementoes, and think a man's aye as steadfast as a rock."

But he had gone nearly the length of the High Street, when he wondered if he should not have bought that other ring he had fancied, a small ruby cut like a heart. He had heard that a woman should be won by a ruby and kept by a turquoise. Besides,

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Margaret Gray was not like other girls ; and the more he thought of it, the more he realized that she had never pledged herself to him, and that, though she loved him, she had shown no eagerness, and, indeed, had fixed her mind on his having to do as his father bade, and marry Lizzie Drummond. If he gave her that turquoise ring, she might look at it with that strange, quiet face of hers, and turn those steadfast eyes upon him, and ask if it would not be more fitting that he should give the ring to Miller Drummond's daughter. The ruby ring she might take as a present. He liked to think of her wearing a ring he had given her. In the days to come he would look at it, and think how much he had loved her, and also how he had been in awe of something in the girl. He smiled. When they were married . . . ah ! he brightened at the thought ; then he frowned, remembering what his father had said, and all the fret of ways and means ; and from that came thoughts of how he would hate, how little he could bear with, a life of poverty and of servitude ; for where there is no independence there is servitude.

After all, he pondered, was it worth his

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while to go against his father's will, and be set adrift? He knew the old man well. There would be no half-measures, no relenting. He, James Ruthven, would be lopped off from his heritage as a broken branch from a tree. He would have neither bed nor board, horse nor dog; no influence, no money, nothing; he would be a beggar. And if he married Lizzie Drummond he would do well; later, he would be rich; later, Silence Farm would be his.

After all, Liz was a comely lass enough. John Drummond was a comfortable man, and well thought of by the countryside; many of the gentry had him to company, and he was welcome with the hounds and on the racecourse. He, James, with his tastes and habits, would get on with Mr. Drummond; as father-in-law the wealthy miller would do well for him. The more he thought of it, the more he saw that it was no light thing he was doing in giving up all this for the sake of a penniless girl who was no better than a servant—in fact, who would be a servant soon if he remained obdurate, and the old man's hand was forced.

"By God! yes," he muttered, as he

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reached the moor-edge and struck across the heather ; "there's ~~not~~ one man in a thousand would do as I'm doing. And if Madge . . . if Madge doesn't see that, she's not fit for me, that's just the truth. Why, there's many would think it a wonderful thing even to hear of a man being so true and unselfish."

The more he pondered this matter of possible, of imminent poverty, the more he resented the mischance of love. Why was not Margaret Gray, Lizzie Drummond ? How simple it would all be ! Or why was she not anybody else than Margaret Gray ? Why was she there, half-kinswoman or none ? Who was she ? Why did he care for her so much ?

"Faith ! I wonder if I'm really in love, after all," he muttered ; "I wonder—I wonder."

He thought of all Margaret was—of her winsome ways ; of her brave, strong nature ; of her lovely quietude. Strong—yes, that's what she was—too strong for a woman, for an unwedded girl any way, he thought. How she hated all that was weak and mean ! He had not forgotten her scornful eyes when, a year or more ago, he had staggered into the

Silence Farm

house heavy with drink, and unable to speak or think save in the brutish way. And if she knew . . . ah, by God! if she knew about . . . about Jean Dunlop! Well, there were others than Jean: there were farm-girls, and that dark strapping lass at the Muirton Arms, and that pretty Stevenson girl who had saved herself by wedding old Macmillan the attorney, and . . . and . . . but most of all, by a long way, was the matter o' Jean.

Where was Jean now? he wondered. "My! what a fuss she made!" his lips said for him, while his mind shrank before the memory of a white face and despairing eyes. "It's my one sin," he muttered, as he struck at the tops of the yellow tansies which grew out of the pasture-patch he was crossing; "all the others had only themselves to blame, if blame there was for some o' them, at least —ay, even Nellie Stevenson; an' by the Lord I'd ha' mairied *her* if I'd had enough o' my own to keep a house goin'. But Jean . . . no, no, that was a sair business."

How the girl had cried! he remembered; how she had cried! and then, with sudden dignity, asked him to be a true man; and how white and strange she grew when he

Silence Farm

said that he would be penniless himself if he married the daughter of a penniless village schoolmaster! Ah . . . he remembered that pang at his heart when she had waited till he was done, and then said quietly, "But your promise, your sacred solemn pledge to me, James?"

Well, well, it was the way o' women. Soon or late, soon or late . . . then suddenly what there was of manhood in him rose at the thought, and he knew that he was a liar and a coward, seeking refuge in the old cynical lies and old bitter cowardice of the tribe of the swine.

And Madge, he knew, had known and cared for the poor lass. When her trouble came, and whispers made life intolerable, she had made up her mind to leave the quiet home at Sunriggs and go to Edinburgh, though she had no friend there. And Margaret's heart had been so fired with pity and anger that, when she found Jean would not betray the name of the man who had brought her to shame, nor in any way force him either to make good his pledge or to accept his far lesser share in the burden, she went to Edinburgh with her, and did what she

Silence Farm

could to make the bitter way less desolate and bitter. But, after all, she had not saved the poor lass. A few months after the child was born it died, and either in new grief or old despair, or some shadow of a hope, Jean had gone out of Scotland—to London, it was said—with one of the Castle officers.

That was two years ago, and James Ruthven knew that the man with whom Jean had gone had been dead for eighteen months or more—and that, too, in a far-away land—so that the poor lass could have had but a short life with him.

Where was she now? What was she doing? An ugly rumour had reached the countryside, through Robert Allen, the chief draper of Muirton, that the girl had sunk to the streets, and between that and heart-fever was not far from her pitiable end. James wondered. How pretty she was, too!—a shy, tender lass.

Only once had Margaret spoken to him about Jean, since that now far-off day when she had asked him to find out for her the name of the man who had brought a homeless, shameful exile upon the girl who had trusted him. That was when she heard of

Silence Farm

the death of the child and the disappearance of Jean.

How well James remembered her words ! He had answered with some foolish, insincere phrase, half of Scripture, half of inane commonplace. "No," Margaret had replied, "the girl will die of a broken heart ; the man will not suffer in any way : what you call God will remain deaf and dumb."

He had been shocked. He was shocked now at the after-memory. Was Margaret really quite the girl for a young laird o' promise like James Ruthven to marry ? Faith ! if only . . . And then James Ruthven smiled, and smiled again and again as he walked onward with a swinging stride.

For an hour he walked, and in that time was no more troubled with thoughts of Jean Dunlop or of the others. Besides, those days were over. He faced life now : it was better so. James recognised the manliness of his attitude, of his thoughts.

But about Margaret . . . about Lizzie Drummond : that was a difficulty indeed.

Slowly a phantom led him into a place of beauty and fragrance and silence. That

Silence Farm

phantom was the image of his desire, and had the starry eyes and strong, beautiful face of Margaret.

No, he could not give her up—he loved her. There was no woman like her. There was not a girl between the Pentlands and Solway Firth who could match her.

As for Lizzie Drummond, she was one of a multitude. She had but to change her name: in looks, manner, dress, everything, she was to be found everywhere. There were a thousand Lizzies—only one Margaret.

A bitter distaste grew up in his mind. “Why should I, of all men,” he muttered, “not follow my heart? I’m young and handsome, and it’s a black shame I should not wed wi’ the girl I care for, an’ that cares for me.” Soon he was again the lover. It was “Margaret,” “Margaret,” “Margaret,” the yellow-yite sang it as it swung on the gorse, or leaped from spray to spray. He thought of her in the byres; his blood quickened. He recalled her as she had appeared in her white night-dress and pink dressing-gown, when she had lifted the crimson blind and opened the window, herself white and beautiful and wonderful in the

Silence Farm

warm darkness of the night. Warm . . . ah, how warm her hands were! he remembered; how warm her lips! how warm and fragrant her hair!—hair so heavy and long he had never seen the like of it.

He walked swiftly, with shining eyes and a flush in his face. What did it matter what his father said? What did it matter if he lost all, and even Silence Farm did not come to him in the end? Sure enough, it was a dreary place at the best, and deserved its name. If ever it was his, he would change the name to something human and pleasant—back to its old name, perhaps, before his grandfather had called it Silence Farm when he gave it to his Quaker wife, who had borne the name, and afterwards had always called it so, and allowed others to call it so, when, after her tragic death, a doom of silence had fallen upon the place—though others thought that a mere fantasy, and considered more the windy loneliness of the moorland farm.

Margaret was worth it all. But . . . yes, he thought, he must face it: would she be worth it after they had taken the last step? Would she be worth it when he had lived with her awhile, when, perhaps, she was heavy with

Silence Farm

child, when with the child came troubles and worries?

It was a sore burden to him to tie himself down like that. "Curse the love!" he cried, as though to the wind that passed him, soighing across the waste; ("it brings more of the thorn than the rose to most of us.")

Still, "Margaret," "Margaret," "Margaret"; ah, that yellow-yite had the secret! Margaret—that was all; there was no other name, no other way. If—by God, if the girl should not be true, after all! The thought stung his mind like a wasp. There was Will Johnstone. Well, last night, at any rate, it was not Will Johnstone—unless he had grown gray!

What a mystery that was! "Damn it!" he muttered; "the more I think of it, the more bewildered I am. It's the old man's hair, but what about that? There's many a man hereabouts who might have iron-gray hair, to say nothing o' tramps. An' why should he attack me like that, old fury that he was? an' if he was spying on me; why didn't he come upon me as I was whisperin' to Madge at the window? But why attack me at all, as though he wanted to kill me?"

Silence Farm

Faith ! I believe he did. Perhaps he's in love with Madge himself ! By Gad ! I shouldn't wonder. If only he hadn't brought her up more like a daughter than anything else, I'd a'most believe it. But then, curse it ! there's his own wish that Madge should marry. He doesn't seem to care whom. For all his hardness about money, he would let her go to Will Johnstone like a shot, I believe. I'll be damned if I can make it out, an' the more I think of it the more I'm done for. But this much I *do* know : I'll find out who it was who attacked me last night, an' any way I'll find out whether or not it was Mr. Archibald Ruthven, of Silence Farm ; an' if so, the why and wherefore, by God ! An' I know this, too : there's no man alive, whether his name's Will Johnstone or Archibald Ruthven, or any other, that will come between me and my lass, between me and Margaret Gray, my Bonnie Madge—damn the girl for being the witch she is!"

By this time he had crossed the lower end of Wardlaw Muir and was at the ponds. Beyond him, on a low ridge, he could see the Larches, a small wood of larch-trees which surmounted the pastures to the south

Silence Farm

of Silence Farm. The path led to the right of this wood, and joined the highway ; and the heather between the Ponds and the Larches was heavy in many places with bog ; but Ruthven took the heather.

When he came to the Larches he stood for a few minutes, thinking. It was here, at this very spot, he had first realized that he no longer looked upon Margaret otherwise than as a lover. Then, as now, a night-jar whirred his thrilling vehement note. That passionate love-note recalled the past to him. He remembered that Margaret had stood in a gray dress, by a gray larch, on a gray heat-haze evening ; that a night-moth had circled above her head as though she were a flower, and that through the branches of the larch a gray trail of starlight had wandered fitfully. Before, he had never noticed such things. That picture he had seen and remembered. He could see Margaret now, as she was then, and with her head to one side, listening, as the fern-owl churred from a low branch to his crouching mate. For the first time then he had looked at her in a new way—the ancient way of the desire of the eyes. For a time

Silence Farm

they had listened together to the wildest and strangest of all the forest notes of love; then, silent, had moved homeward side by side.

How clearly he recalled that evening! Now, as then, the larches were gray in the gray evening, the night-moths fluttered silently, the bats swung low in their reeling arrowy flight, the evening star trailed her little wavering line of fire, the night-jar churred.

But Margaret . . . ah, if only . . .

James Ruthven started. Beyond, not a hundred yards away, two persons slowly passed between the scattered larches around One Tree Hollow. They were Margaret and Mr. Ruthven. He could see that they were talking earnestly. Once Mr. Ruthven turned, and, looking towards the west, lifted his hat, as though to let the evening air cool his head, and stood thus, impassive. James could discern the white face with its scarlet lips; and the tangled shape, if not the colour, of the iron-gray hair. At times that strange face of his father gave him a sense of horror. He dreaded the silence of the man's life. How keen and vivid a flame was in that life he knew from those red lips which belied the

Silence Farm

white stillness of the face ; from those long, thin, nervous hands which were alone restless in a body controlled in continual reserve ; from the quenchless energy, the ceaseless thought, which lived in the inscrutable eyes.

James saw his father with a swift gesture turn again, and speak to Margaret. To and fro they walked, and Ruthven realized with dull anger that this was because they could not be observed there either from Silence Farm or from the highway.

What were they talking about ? he wondered. Would Margaret, when they met, know of what had happened last night ? But no, after all, he muttered, the thing was becoming more and more improbable ; his midnight assailant could not have been his father. Why, the very fact that Mr. Ruthven invariably went to bed immediately after ten made the likelihood still more remote. To what end, too ? Well, it was a maze. But if, he thought—if, notwithstanding all he had understood or been led to understand, his father really loved Margaret, and perhaps she him (or, if not loving, at least preferring him), why, then . . .

Silence Farm

But with a stifled laugh, and an ugly look in his gypsy eyes, James Ruthven turned.

"No. If I thought that, I'd 'go down upon them just now, and have the matter settled right away. I think I know who would come out best! Jim an' young blood *versus* property and that white face! Why, a girl with a tenth part o' Madge's life couldn't help herself. Face to face, I back the pulse o' youth! But no, no, no; it isn't *that*. I'll find it all out in good time. Damn it all! when *am* I to see Madge? I'll go round to the byres, and catch her as she comes back; she's sure to come alone, an' as demure 's the cat after stealing cream."

He turned, and walked round by the edge of the wood. Skirting the south lip of One Tree Hollow, he made as though to cross the broken pasture towards the byres; but before he had reached the moor-heather again a sullen look came into his face, and his eyes darkened.

He turned and walked swiftly back. The two would have seen him by now, of course; he knew that. But he had just put his hand to the envelope which held the lock of iron-gray hair. He knew the colour and feel of

Silence Farm

that hair without withdrawing it. The knowledge angered him. The sudden knowledge had risen to his brain in a confusing vapour.

He was startled when, as he reached the corner of the Larches, he saw Margaret, alone, walking towards him. He stopped. He felt the blood rise to his temples and swing there like a heavy pendulum. What was Margaret about to say? Had she chosen? Had she been told by his father about Jean Dunlop? The old man knew all, and had been scornful and bitter to him about it; probably he knew what James hoped Margaret did not know, that the girl was now the penniless waif of chance lust. No, he had already given James his promise that he would never speak of the subject again, to him or anyone. Would Margaret . . .

But suddenly he realized that the girl was close to him. He had never imagined that Margaret would pass without a word. Almost before he knew it she was by his side, had looked at him with a grave smile, and was swiftly gone. He turned, but did not call. Something in her set mouth, in her eyes still wet, restrained him. He

Silence Farm

hesitated, and was on the edge of pursuit, when he caught sight of his father

Mr. Ruthven leaned against a tree. Something in his attitude overwhelmingly appealed to, perhaps startled, his son. Slowly James approached. Archibald Ruthven thought he was alone and unobserved; that, his son saw, understood. He who had never shown before any sign of weakness, was now like an old man, broken with sorrowful years and further sorrow upon sorrow. He in whose eyes James had never seen tears was now shaken with sobs, the white face ashy-gray and wet with the bitter water of grief.

So deep, so terrible, were those sobs, so shaken with inexplicable agony of spirit was this strong man — Archibald Ruthven, so stern, so hard, so relentless it was said—that his son dared not intrude. What sympathy could he give, what solace offer, that would not be worse than useless, that might well be proudly resented?

Chapter VI

WHEN James Ruthven turned from the sacredness of this terrible and mysterious suffering, he moved silently across the grass towards a single thorn that rose out of a short stretch of pasture known as Fairy Acre. That way he knew his father would come when he returned to Silence Farm.

He lay at the foot of the thorn, obscure in the heavy shadow. Thence he could watch the old man. Again and again he recalled those words he had read in the parlour that dreary night, already so hopelessly remote in his life, it seemed to him, and again so recently read in the open page in his father's bedroom : "It is enough : now stay thine hand."

He saw Archibald Ruthven withdraw from the tree, and stand with folded arms staring long and fixedly at Silence Farm. The old man seemed in a dream. Slowly he came

Silence Farm

along the trodden sheep-path, his gaze dwelling upon unseen things. As he drew near, James saw that the white face was stern and set again, and with that old indescribable sense of terrible youth in it given by those vivid crimson lips.

Archibald Ruthven was close upon the thorn before he descried the figure of his son. He started, frowned, but in a moment these signs were gone as they had come. When the two men faced each other, there was no trace of emotion on the face of the elder.

"Is that you, James? Did Peter Scott like the sheep? . . . Ay, I thought he would. At . . . what's that you say? . . . Well, well, 'tis a fair price, though not what I hoped. I'm content, I'm content, lad."

James had risen, and now looked at his father with furtive eyes.

"Well, that's more than I am, sir," he said sullenly. "I tell you, sir, it's not what I am."

The old man looked at him grimly. As was often his way either in scornful anger or in pleasantry, a pleasantry seldom without irony, when he spoke again it was in the broad Lallan tongue of the countryside.

Silence Farm

"I ~~h~~anna yet seen ye sae muckle interested in the sheep, James, forby that lot that was your ain last Candlemas."

"Damn the sheep!"

Mr. Ruthven's gaze shifted beyond the speaker, gray and hard as the stone dyke on which it rested.

"Well?" added his son sullenly; "well, what then?"

Mr. Ruthven spoke slowly:

"I was thinking that I am not too old, that I'm strong enough yet, but that *you're* too old, for me to put my stick about you for that insolence of your speech to me, your father, James Ruthven."

The young man shrugged his shoulders. Both, as by a common impulse, moved slowly forward towards Silence Farm. For a score yards they walked without a word. Suddenly, and as though the words were shaken from him as leaves before a gale, the old man spoke, but without looking round.

"Ay, I'll trouble you for no more of your foul, evil words, James Ruthven. It's time you went from here. It's time you could damn your own sheep, in ~~your~~ own place. I've already spoken to you about Martin

Silence Farm

Comyn. To-day I've heard from him. Heatherton Ha' farmlands are mine, and now they're yours as my tenant. The farm-house is a good one, and old Sinclair and his wife are there to look after you. If you want company, there's company to be had. If you want work—an' I'd recommend you to want it—there's mair than enough to keep ye at it frae morn till nicht. But for a year from to-day, James Ruthven, I'll ask ye to abide in your own place. I'll ask ye not to come back to this house. An' what's got to be done is best done soon; an' I'll expect you to be off to Heatherton Ha' the morrow's morn, if to-night's too hurried for a dandy lad. It's time you were a man, Master James, an' no hanger-on at your father's coat-tails."

James Ruthven flushed angrily. At first he could not speak; then the wrong words came to his lips. At last, controlling himself by a great effort, he gave his answer:

"A year's a long time. There's no shame in wishing to be at home at the New Year. I suppose I may come home for Hogmanay?"

Archibald Ruthven glanced at his son

Silence Farm

half scornfully, half amusedly, before he said dryly : " Margret an' I will be able to sit up till twal' o' the clock without yourself, James, my lad. We're no that feart o' bogles."

" I want to come back at New Year."

" Have ye forgotten what I'm sayin' to ye? . . . I'm saying that I will ask you to go to-morrow morning an' tak' up your new work, James Ruthven."

" If I may come home for a bit at New Year."

" Tuts, lad, it's no worth while coming sae far for one day."

" I didn't say it was for one day."

" Are ye sae sair anxious to come for yer auld father's sake? Will ye come if there's none here but mysel' ?"

" You're fond o' the farm-talk to-day, sir. I think the common Scots sits ill on you when you're speaking to your own son."

Mr. Ruthven frowned, though the frown on his face was not so dark as that on the face of his son.

" Will ye go, or not?"

" I'll go to Heatherton to-morrow, father since you're giving me this good set-off—whether welcome or not's another matter

Silence Farm

but either I'll come back, an' welcome, for the New Year week, an' at Martinmas, too, if I want, or as soon before or after it as I can, or I'll never come back at all."

The old man laughed, if a short, bitter, savage chuckle could be called a laugh.

"Hoots, man, this is a farm, na a rantin'-booth for play-actor bodies to bring the stars aboot their heids!" Then suddenly both voice and manner softened. Mr. Ruthven turned, and for a moment laid his hand lightly on his son's shoulder. "You'll be back often enough, I've no doubt, James, an' welcome too; an' the more welcome when ye find a decent girl down in the South, an' bring her to me and let the old man see the mother o' his descendants. You know it's my eager wish ye should wed that pretty lass, Lizzie Drummond, an' I hope ye'll come to't yet; an' the girl's in love with you, James—I'm sure o' that. But no man can force love to another. If ye can't, ye can't. An' if that's so, though I'll be sorry for't—and you'd find it better for yourself every way, my lad, now and later—then I'll say this: that ye might well dae waur than think o' a lass like Kirsten Comyn."

Silence Farm

Mr. Ruthven stopped for a moment, perhaps to give more point to what he had just said. But James's rising anger took it otherwise.

"I'll ask you once again, sir, not to speak to me as though I were one o' the farm lads! You don't speak braid Scots to me in private as a rule, and why should you do so now? If you're making a mock o' me, you're taking the wrong road to get your own way."

Mr. Ruthven shot a sombre glance at his son.

"I'll speak in the way that suits me best, . . James, now and at any time. And why are you grown so sudden particular? Is't because ye hae had wurrd frae that poor lass, Jean Dunlop? Perhaps she's sent you the London accent o' the streets, so that your father's Lallan tongue sounds fause in your ear—as fause, say, as you were to Jean!"

With a sudden burst of anger James drew aside, raised his arm as though about to strike, and muttered savagely a blasphemous curse.

Mr. Ruthven looked at him disdainfully.

"Curses like that come home to roost,

Silence Farm

young man. You'll rue the day—yes, James Ruthven, you'll rue the day!"

"Don't drive me too far, you . . . don't force my hand, I tell you! Father or no father, there's a limit to what I'll stand; and after last night . . ."

Abruptly he ceased. The words had fallen from him like a spate o' water.

His eyes swept his father's face. That had grown whiter, ashier than usual, surely; ashy-gray; and the red lips compressed to two red lines of blood. But it was in the eyes he saw that which appalled him. Was it terror or horror, or a misery more deep and hopeless than any he had ever known?

With a sudden gesture, he put his hand before his eyes. He could not look, he could not have his father see that he looked upon this glimpse of an eating cancer of grief. When he withdrew his hand, his father's face was as unperturbed as usual, except for the deepened furrow between the temples.

"I was saying, James," he resumed, as though no interruption had occurred—"I was saying that ye might well dae waur

Silence Farm

than think o' a lass like Kirsten Comyn. She's ~~no~~ too proud to have ye, tho', Guid's sake, ye're no my own notion o' a man to handle women. As for Martin Comyn, he's a man who'd be glad enough o' the connection. He knows what I know."

"What's that you know? what's that you're referring to?"

But, ignoring his son's peremptory question, Mr. Ruthven, without a trace of embarrassment, resumed :

"An' he's a warm man, too—a warm man, my lad. Ay, ye might well dae worse. See here, James : off ye go to-morrow morning, an' ye'll be welcome at New Year for a se'en-night. An' if, when ye come then, ye can tell me that you an' Kirsten Comyn are thinking o' t', why, then I'll give ye a free quittance of Heatherton Ha' farmlands, an' two thousand pounds—two thousand pounds—to the good."

The young man gave no answer. He did not see the twitch in his father's face, but he saw the long, nervous fingers feverishly inter-clasp till the ends were white and the nails gray as dust.

With a forced laugh, harsh and dry and

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mirthless, with more of a sob in it than a laugh, Archibald Ruthven turned ~~leading~~ eyes on the sullen face of the young man beside him.

"Two thousand pounds and Heatherton Ha', James, and never a word more o' the poor old Scots that worries you so much, my lad. Honour bright, Jamie lad, you'll find me a model in my English away from the farm!"

The pleasantry died away in silence. Ruthven did not look up.

"Well, James?"

"You may keep your two thousand, if it's to come to me only on the head o' Kirsten Comyn. I tell you straight, father, I have my eye on a lass nearer home."

"It's Lizzie Drummond, perhaps?"

Archibald Ruthven's hand shook, and his voice was hoarse.

"No, it isn't Lizzie Drummond. You know well enough who it is."

In silence the two men walked on. As they neared the byres, the smell of the dung mixed with the heavy odour of the turnip-field beyond and came intimately upon them. Each in his own way noticed it, for the senses are watch-dogs that do not stray.

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"Come beyont the byres," said the old man.

His voice was so harsh and strained that his son could not but glance at him. The white face was ashy-gray, grayer and harder than he had ever seen it. The great dusky eyes had a red light in them. They blazed with misery. So James Ruthven thought; so Archibald Ruthven knew.

In silence both crossed the donkey-yard beyond the byres, and, skirting the turnip-field and a big potato-patch, passed on to the moor-heather again.

"Well . . . father?" asked James at last, in a low voice, and not ungently.

The old man looked really old, he thought, as he watched a wavering hand go to the dry lips. But he was hard and strong still—hard as granite, tough as heather. The hand might waver for a moment, the scarlet fade in the whitened lips, the iron-gray hair grow damp in the sweat of the ashy forehead; but the indomitable will, the fierce spirit, the tense mind—these were alive still, and these were Archibald Ruthven.

Thus thought his son, while he listened also to the laughter and loud, coarse, kindly

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voices of the girls in the byres as they sat at the milking.

One of them sang a snatch of song :

“ *O it's a bonnie, bonnie warl',
Said young Johnnie Scott,
A bonnie, bonnie warl',
Whether we lo'e or not,
Said young Johnnie Scott.*”

In the big hen-yard behind the byres Mrs. Dixon, the gardener's buxom young wife, scattered grain and mash among the clucking fowls, while her little Jimmie and Peggy ran to and fro laughing and *shoo-ing*, to chase away the greedy pigeons which had fluttered with loud-flapping wings from the byre-roof.

The young man had an instinct to leave, to turn back. He wanted to see Margaret ; still more to be among those laughing sonsie lasses in the byres, or even to be playing at Auld Clootie with the half-terrified, half-rapturously delighted children of Mrs. Dixon. However, though less gently, he again asked :

“ Well, father ?”

“ I will tell you a story,” began Archibald Ruthven, in a voice as cold and frozen as his face. “ I will tell you a story. It was told

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me by a man I know. There was a man who had a son, and that son tried to break his father's heart. And for why? Because o' a girl's face. That's not the way for strong men. He was *the son* of a man—that was all. For he knew that his father would rather see the girl dead than wedded to him—ay, an' that he would rather kill his son than see him touch that girl in love. There was good reason for't. 'It is enough,' he thought; 'a father's command, a father's prayer, like *that*, is enough.' One day he found his son trying to persuade the girl to run away with him. That was the *shadow* o' doom. But he had heard enough—more than enough, by the living God! for he heard what made him know that there was good cause for wedding the girl or taking her away. An' that was the *voice* o' doom. So that night . . . "

Archibald Ruthven's voice had grown so hoarse that at last the words clattered confusedly on his dry lips. At "So that night" his heart had gone into his throat, and he stood as one demented with sudden ill. Then, recovering himself with an effort, he took up his narrative again, and in the same

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hard and frozen voice, though with a vibrant passion beneath it that clanged along the nerves of his companion :

“ So that night he sent the girl to a neighbour’s with a message. He met her on the way back, and shoved her into a deep pool that was close by the moorland road, an’ drowned her deep. An’ that was neither the shadow nor the voice, but the doom itself.”

James Ruthven looked at his father, wondering if he were mad. The old man divined the thought.

“ No, James ; the man of whom I speak was not mad. What he did broke his heart, but he was a strong man. For he did not do that sin but to prevent a greater sin—I say he did not put a crown o’ thorns on his heart but in order to prevent a greater sin.”

Was it a threat ? James Ruthven wondered. If so, his father was mad indeed. Did the old man think that he would give up Margaret just because of a silly, impotent threat? But even while this savage fantasy wrought him to a passion of anger, he knew in his heart that he was doing his father injustice. No ; whatever Archibald Ruthven meant to

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convey by his mysterious story, he did not mean that he would actually kill Margaret rather than see her wed his son. The thing was impossible, absurd. The wild words had some other meaning, some terrible meaning, probably, but not this meaning.

Perhaps he was really mad? No, no, no! the man was himself—sane, hard, cold, with fire below, and the bitter, intolerant, arrogant, grasping way that was his own.

For a moment the young man hesitated, then turned upon his father with uncontrolled fury.

“ You . . . you devil! . . . But don’t think to frighten me with your silly nonsense! Father or no father, I’d . . . ” Then, suddenly changing to a bitter, sneering irony, he added: “ Strange. I was told that story, too; but my friend brought it further down than did yours. For he told me that the murderer had been found. And how do you think he was discovered, he who thought himself so secure? It was because the girl in her struggle had snatched at his hair. It was iron-gray hair, and in her drowned hand were two locks of it. And by the same token, sir”—and now James Ruthven spoke

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with a savage abruptness, while with furious haste he thrust his right hand into his breast-pocket, and, tearing off the envelope, held the iron-gray hair before the old man's staring eyes—"by the same token, sir, these are the very locks of hair—fresh, living hair! and, by God! as like yours as though come o' the same crop!"

With that he thrust them into his father's hand, and with a bitter laugh swung on his heel and walked towards the byres.

Archibald Ruthven reeled like a drunken man. In his lifeless face even the scarlet lips had grown ashen. A purple hue spread patches of shadow underneath his heavy eyes. He would have fallen in his agony had he not at that moment caught sight of Duncan, the second shepherd. With an effort that was almost greater than his strained heart could bear, he pulled himself together as the man approached.

"I've been wantin' to see you, Mr. Ruthven, sir, about them . . ."

"Later, later, Duncan. But go up at once to the gravel-pit near the Larches. There's a ewe there that's fallen and broken a leg."

Chapter VII

WHEN James Ruthven entered the byres there was an instant silence. Each of the dairy-girls saw there was something wrong, and instinct made each fear that she was the culprit.

"Where's Margaret—where's Miss Gray?" he asked, when to his disappointment he saw that she was not there. A momentary disappointment, for at once he realized that he might now find her in her room.

"Naething wrang, Mr. James?" asked one of the girls, doubtless with a clear conscience for the occasion.

"No, nothing. Why should there be? Get on with your work, Bess, an' never mind other folks' affairs."

"You're no so bad at that *yersel'*."

The girls laughed, but the tables were turned on the speaker when young Ruthven said maliciously :

"Well, to be sure, that's what Davy

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Millar said the other night, when I came upon you lyin' in his arms in the oak-coppice."

The girl bounded to her feet, upsetting her milk-keg, whereat there was another shout of laughter.

"It's a lee, that!" she cried, with flaming face. "I wouldna sae demean mysel'. An' as for Davy Millar, what he said was . . ."

But even before the loud accusing cries let her see what a slip she had made she knew it herself.

"Ay," asked Ruthven, "what did he say? Perhaps it was to ask me to be god-father, as they do in the South, an' he bein' a Derbyshire man? Eh . . . was that it, Bess? Take my word for't, lass, and make haste to get the ring out o' Master Davy. It's time, I'm sure!"

"Weel, I'm no denyin' that there's none in the parish ha' sae guid a richt to advise in matters o' the kind. That much I'll say, ony way."

Again the girls laughed, and Ruthven flushed slightly, half with anger, for he did not feel sure as to how much was implied.

"Well, that'll do now," he said, in an altered tone. "Get on with your milking,

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you lazy huzzies! This isn't Saturday night. An' as for you, Bess, you'll have that spilt milk to be taken off your week's wage. No, not a word more, or off ye go. We don't want the likes o' you at Silence Farm; so just you be careful wi' your tongue, my lass, or you'll rue it."

The great coarse-featured, red-handed lass seated herself on her three-legged milking-stool again, shamefaced and sullen, but yet not able to refrain from an added word:

"It's no for James Ruthven to be speakin' o' the likes o' annybody. Them in glass hooses shouldna throw stanes. An' there's no a glint o' truth in what ye said. There's nae mair betwixt Davy Millar an' mysel' than . . . than . . . what's betwixt ye an' Miss Mairgret . . . as ye ken weel, either way o't."

"Another word, ye impudent baggage, an' off ye go from Silence Farm. An' let me tell ye this, my lass: I'll trouble neither you nor any o' you to speak o' Miss Gray in that way. I'd as soon let you speak disrespectfully of . . . of . . . ay, o' my father."

"Or o' Jean Dunlop," murmured one of the girls, but so low that he could not hear.

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With that he went out of the byres, and slammed the lower partition behind him.

As he walked towards the house the loud laughing of the girls annoyed him, but not so much as the song that one of them began singing again.

*"O it's a bonnie, bonnie warl',
Said young Johnnie Scott ;
An' what's the odds if a lad's forgot—
There's as guid kail in as out o' the pot,
Laughed young Johnnie Scott."*

"Damn the silly fools!" Ruthven muttered savagely. Then he came to the doorstep and opened the door.

The house was even more silent than usual. He went into the parlour, but there was no one there. At the foot of the stairs he listened. He could not hear Margaret moving in her room. He went quietly upstairs and knocked at her door. There was no answer. He turned the handle; the door was locked.

"Margaret!" he called, in a low voice, for he did not wish the cook or kitchen-wench to hear. "Margaret!"

No answer. Again he tried the door. Stooping, he looked at the keyhole. To his surprise, there was no key. He could see

Silence Farm

into the room, and by kneeling could see the bed. Margaret was not on it.

With a continued knock he called loudly :

"Margaret! Madge! are you there? I want to see you a minute."

As he intended, the house-girl heard him.

"Is that you, Mr. James?" she cried from the foot of the stairs.

"Who do you think it is, you fool? Where's Miss Margaret?"

"She's awa', sir."

"Gone! Where's she gone to? She can't have gone far."

"She's awa' to Edinburry."

"To Edinburgh! . . . Why, girl, I saw her not half an hour ago. How can she have gone to Edinburgh?"

"She came in aboot half an 'oor ago, an' when she got here she found Adam Semple, the carrier, at the back, wi' a box o' groceries. She tellt him to bide a wee, an' soon she cam' doon wi' her best cloak an' hat on, an' a bag in her hand, an' Adam gaed up an' fetcht her box. 'I'm awa' to Edinburry for a jaunt,' she says, though the wet was in her een. An' then afore I knew whaur I was, she an' Adam were off click-clack-click as

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fast 's ivver the auld mare 'ud go. He was to pit her doon at Wardlaw Junction, an' by the same token she'll be there noo, an' in the train as likely 's not."

James looked at his watch. What the girl said had at least no lie on the face of it. For a moment he had wondered if she had gone off to see Will Johnstone.

"Did she leave no message?"

"She said Mr. Ruthven would gie the hoose-orders when he cam' in."

Puzzled, he turned and went to his own room. The moment he entered he saw a white envelope lying on the polished mahogany top of the chest of drawers.

Before he recognised the handwriting he knew it was Margaret's. Well, here would be an explanation of this bewilderingly sudden move in one so quiet and regular as Margaret Gray, in a house so dull and methodical as Silence Farm.

He had not often seen her handwriting. He looked at it with a thrilling sense that the woman was in it. With a sudden gesture, he raised the envelope to his lips; then, impatiently tearing it, he stared.

There was no letter. There was no ex-

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planation. There was no message to him, James, from her, Margaret. One word only was written, but that burned itself into his mind as an acid :

“Good-bye.”

That was all. What could it mean? Rather, could it have any meaning but one, seeing what had been between them, and the kind of girl Margaret was, so strong and reserved?

“But why,” he asked himself feverishly—“why—why—why?”

Did she love him still? Had his father, persuaded her that his son was going to marry Lizzie Drummond or Martin Comyn’s girl, or even that it was beholden upon her not to spoil his chances in life? Had the old man offered “to do well by her” if she would marry Will Johnstone or some other? Had he spoken plain to her, and, finding her obdurate, refused to let her stay at Silence Farm, and insisted on her going out to service, as he had once threatened?

Yes, he thought, that was it: the girl had been talked over; or, if she hadn’t been, she’d been told to go, or as likely as not had herself decided to go.

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Turning abruptly, he walked into Mr. Ruthven's room.

No, there was no letter there. So his father knew. It had all been arranged, doubtless.

"Damn him!" he muttered, "he'll pay for this. I never wanted the girl so much before. Now she's gone, I realize I'd rather have her, if it meant beggary for me, than not have her. If he's up to any game, I'll be even with him. No sudden marriage with Will Johnstone—or with himself, if that's what he's up to. An', by the Lord, I shouldn't wonder but it's that, after all! Perhaps he's going to ship her off to America? That's what Gavin Small did with *his* girl when he wanted to get her out of her lad's way. Well, I'd be there almost as soon as she would. Gad! it 'ud be a fine joke if we went out in the same boat, an' he to know nothin' of it till he got my note from the port to say we had sailed together, an' were very happy, an' would be sure to call the kid Archibald if it should be a boy. Gad! that 'ud be worth doing. That 'ud pay off old scores. Damn Silence Farm! The very name o' the place is enough to

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give one the megrims. Out yonder, Madge an' I would . . .

But again the thought overcame him that his father had won Margaret for himself. It was not impossible. She had always loved and served the old man. True, it was as a loving daughter or niece; but how was he, James, to know what was behind the girl's ways? "She might have had her eye on the place ever since she saw how the cat jumped," he muttered. "Who can tell? Well, anyhow, I'll satisfy myself about that. A letter will do it if I can't see her; but I'll see about *that*."

Hearing his father enter, he returned hurriedly to his own room.

"Curse it!" he muttered; "perhaps the whole o' that story was got up just to keep me from returning to the house till Madge had got fair away." Then, with sullen eyes, he looked in his desk and in his pockets to see what money he had. The flame of his anger was fed by his disappointment. His last money had been used in that purchase at Muirton. Already he had overdrawn his allowance, and there were pressing bills to settle. He remembered

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now that the few pound-notes he had left in his desk, as he thought, had been used. A florin and a few coppers stood for all his available cash.

For some time he sat staring out at the garden. "After all," he said, as though arguing with himself, "is she worth it? Liz Drummond would bore me to death before the honeymoon was over; but that Comyn girl would make a good wife as well as sweetheart. An' Heatherton Ha' farmlands . . . an' two thousand pounds . . . an' Silence Farm itself in due time. . . ."

He rose and looked at himself in the glass. He smiled. A good-looking fellow, and one that any girl might be glad to have for a sweetheart . . . even if, even if—well, even if no marriage came of it. Why shouldn't he? . . . An' as for Madge—as likely as not the girl was eager to give him all he wanted. The dear, haughty jade! . . . but just then his eye wandered to a framed photograph of Margaret that she had given him on his birthday three years ago. It was formal and old-fashioned, but there was no mistaking that strong, quiet face, those brave, beautiful, steadfast eyes.

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"By Gad, what a fool I am!" he muttered, consciously somewhat shamefaced. "She's one in a thousand. I might whistle till Doomsday, unless it was her own will. Faith! that's where it is. *That* I'll soon find out. If I can't see her, a word will tell me what I'm to expect. But I'll have that word from Margaret Gray herself, and through no other.

A bell rang loudly. He rose, washed his hands, and went downstairs.

Mr. Ruthven had already begun his supper. Sullenly James sat opposite him at the round table. Had it been set for three, he might have made some comment; as it was, he said nothing. A furtive glance at his father's face had shown him that Mr. Ruthven was as cold and stern and composed as his wont. It amazed him, after all that had happened, after that parting, when he had thrust the tell-tale locks into his hand, that his father seemed so absolutely indifferent, oblivious even of any reason for disquietude.

The meal passed almost in silence. Towards the close James spoke.

"Can you let me have some money, sir? I find myself out of ready cash."

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"No, I can't."

Mr. Ruthven did not speak scathingly nor rebukingly, but with an irritating indifference that was hard to bear.

Nothing more was said till the meal was over, and both sat staring into the fire.

James had little doubt now but that it was his father and no other who had made that sudden, maniacal attack on him in the darkness of the night. But more than ever he was puzzled by the futility of it.

Was it jealousy? He laughed shortly at the thought.

"Why do you laugh? What cause have you for laughing like that, James?"

"Oh, I was thinking of something that amused me. A man's never too old to learn how to make a fool of himself with a woman."

"Or too young to learn the Divine lesson as to honouring his parents."

"Look here, father, I've something to say. Of course I know about Margaret's having gone away, and that she's gone to Edinburgh."

"Has she?"

"You know she has."

"I do not know it."

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"Where has she gone, then?"

"That concerns her, not you."

"Well, any way, what I ask is this. Give me Margaret's address. I want to write to her. If you don't give it to me, I'll wait here till she comes back. Otherwise I'll do as you want: I'll go South to-morrow."

"You will not go to Edinburgh, or wherever she is? You will not ask Margaret to meet you, or see you?"

James Ruthven hesitated.

"No," he said slowly, after a long pause; "I won't go to her, or ask her to meet me or see me. All I want is to write to her. But I won't say what I'll do *after* I hear from her."

"You will go South to Heatherton Ha' to-morrow?"

"I've already said I would."

Mr. Ruthven rose and crossed the room to an old-fashioned bureau. Unlocking a drawer, he took from it a large foolscap envelope full of papers. Stooping, he pencilled an address on a half-sheet of paper, and slipped it into the envelope, which he methodically fastened and sealed.

"Here are the papers about Heatherton

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Ha' farm-lands and your new work, James. And there I've put Margaret's address. She'll be where she now is for a few days yet, any way. I will post this to you to-morrow. It will be at Heatherton Grange nigh as soon as yourself, or with no more than a night's delay at most."

"But, sir, this is too absurd. I asked for . . ."

"I have a reason for't, James. You'll understand later, I dare say. I am tired, and am going to my room. I will see you to-morrow, before you go. Duncan will drive you over to Drayboro' Junction——"

"Not Wardlaw Junction?" interrupted the young man with a sneer.

"As you like. I said Drayboro', as that would save you half an hour or more. You'll have to leave at seven. Good-night."

James rose, and with formal and unreal politeness bowed.

"Good-night," he said stiffly.

"James, my boy . . . ah, no matter. Good-night."

The two men looked at each other. It was the elder whose gaze quailed.

Unable to sit still or think, much less to

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read or drowsily stare into the fire, James waited until he heard his father go to his room and shut his door.

Then he rang the bell, and asked the girl to clear away the things, to put out the lights, and to see that she called him in good time in the morning. Having given these orders, he went to his room, and for an hour busied himself with his packing. From one of his books he copied out some lines, beginning :

“ I shall love thee for ever, my dear one, my own,
Though faithless you turn my joy into moan :
Thy Richard is true, though Love oftentimes lies ;
Thy Richard, my love, is the star in your skies.”

He did not see their bathos. Their sentiment appealed to him.

“ She loves poetry,” he muttered, “ and if that does not reach her, nothing will.”

He would go to bed, he thought; then realized that he could not sleep. A fever of restlessness was on him.

Slipping quietly downstairs, he passed through the kitchen, leaving word with the girl that she was not to fasten the front door. He lit his pipe and wandered round by the byres.

The night was still, with the first autumnal cold in it. The stars were thickly crowded

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as he had not seen them for weeks ; like jets of fire the larger planets changed hues as they pulsed in a visible tremor. The immense vault itself was black only as it sank to its horizons. Black-purple, deep blue, a wonderful star-lit azure, it was laced in one vast quarter with incessant falling stars or the sheen of meteoric dust.

Ruthven could see a long way across the moor. The few stunted thorns rose out of the ground like hunched kye. Two white owls hawked near the ricks ; between the byres and the house a half-dozen bats flew incessantly, whirling this way and that like leaves in a tempest.

He shivered slightly with the sharp freshness of the air. He did not notice when his pipe went out ; his thoughts were elsewhere. They had begun with Margaret and Heatherton Ha' and Kirsten Comyn, and had changed to the roar of unknown London streets, and the white eager-eyed face of a girl, and thence had come to his father again, and to that mysterious suffering of which he had caught a glimpse.

The infinite silence of this life-filled night oppressed his mind with an unwonted

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solemnity, almost with awe. At the last it appalled him.

How, he wondered, could Margaret come out night after night, and stare and dream among those ghastly lonely silences? It would send him mad. What a strange girl she was! Was she, perhaps, looking at these very stars now? He wondered. Why was she so silent about her thoughts? Other women with thoughts talked about them; and if they had none, talked all the more. He could not make her out. She seemed a fitting inmate for Silence Farm. "The name's got into her," he muttered. "That's it. The name, and the mystery of her life and the silence itself—or dulness, as I should call it."

"Poor old man!" he murmured in a moment of tenderness, "I wonder what *he*'s thinking of? Reading his Bible, no doubt. What was it? . . . let me see . . . yes—'It is enough: now stay thine hand.' Perhaps he's reading that. H'm! I wish he'd stay his hand as regards Margaret. Well, we'll see—we'll see. I dare say the old man's tucked up by now, an' chuckling to himself at having got rid o' me so easily. As likely as not he's

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laughing in his sleeve at getting Madge out o' the way for a day or two. I wonder if she's really gone for good."

It was no use. He could not turn his thoughts as he willed, there under that oppressive grandeur. That infinite, terrible silence, amid all that incalculable life—it was too appalling.

With a shake as though to pull himself together, he turned and went back towards the house. Skirting the byres, he heard the rustling of rabbits in the privet-hedge which hid the garden from the moor, and threw some stones here and there to scare the little beasts away.

Entering the garden by a wicket-gate, he strolled slowly towards the house. Suddenly his breath caught. The crimson blind of Margaret's room was . . . crimson. The room was alit, then, and she was there!

Ah, what a fool he had been! It was all a ruse to get him away; and Margaret had not gone at all.

Well, he would have it out with her now, alone or not: but at that alternative he thrust the thought back into his mind, and with stealthy swiftness approached the house.

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Nothing had changed since he had tried to reach Margaret when last that blind had shone a crimson glow into the night. That he saw, as noiselessly he stepped from the grindstone on to the ledge, and thence to the heavy-boarded top of the rain-barrel.

The window was half open. Had Margaret left it so? Yes, he remembered now that he had seen it so when he looked through the keyhole.

Gently he raised himself till his arms were on the sill. With cautious finger he drew the blind slightly to one side.

There was indeed someone in the room, but it was not Margaret. A tall, gaunt figure kneeled by her bed, with forehead bent against the counterpane, and outreaching hands thrown there in the last supplication of weariness or utter despair.

When Archibald Ruthven slowly rose to his feet, his lips still muttering in prayer, his son saw the white rugged face lit as with the unquiet light that is in the suspense of storm. The eyes were wells of tears. The sheen glittered from his face in the candlelight.

He did not look towards the window. With a heavy sigh he turned once more to the bed.

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"My God! my God!" he exclaimed in a broken voice. "Is it not enough? May not this Thy servant now say, '*It is enough: now stay Thine hand.*'"

Slowly he turned, as though listening. Again he sighed. Leaning, he blew out the light. In the darkness James Ruthven heard his father sobbing. His heart ached. Then the sobbing ceased, the door opened and closed, and a key was turned.

Chapter VIII

JAMES RUTHVEN slept little that night. Dreams haunted what broken slumber he did get. Constantly he saw his father in some perilous position ; once he saw him as a gaunt skeleton driving a ewe. The ewe fell into a pit, and a veiled rider on a white horse rode by, and lassoed the shepherd with a jerk, so that he was swung to a gibbet, where his bones clattered in the wind.

From dreams such as these he woke with a sweat on his brow. Sometimes he recognised in them the colouring of actual events, as in that of the skeleton shepherd ; for he recollect ed the ewe that had fallen into the gravel-pit near the Larches, and also how, in crossing the wilderness from Muirton, he had come upon the bones of a sheep that had perished in one of the winter snowstorms. In others he was perplexed by a tragic uncertainty, now as to happenings for which

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he could not account, now as to shadowy unrealities which were on the verge of becoming actualities more dread than what was terrifyingly hinted.

It was a relief to rise before the servant called him. When he had finished dressing, he went out into the passage, and noticed with quick pleasure that the key of Margaret's room had been left on the outside.

He was glad to be in that room again. It had a foreign look, and yet was still Margaret's. He glanced at the two score or so of books which were in the triple-shelf bookcase above the chest of drawers. Some of the books were birthday and New Year gifts from himself. He had read few that were there. One or two puzzled him, the more so as they were underlined here and there, or margin-marked. He had enjoyed reading to Margaret, but that was mainly because he admired his own voice. She read too monotonously, he thought. Strange that, as his elocutionary powers had developed, Madge had seemed to care less and less to hear him read. And these marked books, he pondered curiously, what could a girl like Margaret Gray want—after all, was

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she more than a farm-girl?—with books such as some of these volumes, cheap reprints in a popular series though they were? H'm! they looked dry enough—"more in the old man's way, I should think."

There were one or two volumes among the books of poetry, too, which puzzled him. He had looked upon himself as Margaret's guide in poetic literature ever since (by an accident, for the book had been presented to him by the minister's daughter, that lady having a zeal for the refining of the agricultural classes), he had given her a copy of what proved to be her favourite poem, "Evangeline." Yes, he had given her that ^{Mrs.} Hemans, which she had not cared for; and that "Aurora Leigh," which she read ^{oftener} than any other book; and that "Idylls of the Kings," which had left her wholly unmoved, being, indeed, to her an alien world in a foreign speech; and that Dante, which she had found too portentous to read. There, too, was Pollok's "Course of Time" that her father had given her, and side by side an earlier gift, Thomson's "Seasons." Yes, there was the "Don Juan" ^{he,} James, had posted to her on her last birthday, and there-

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with had made her so angry. He took the book in his hands; on the flyleaf Margaret had written : "This poet may be very famous, but he writes for people in drawing-rooms and hothouses. It would do him good to work for his living on the farm. I would give him the byres to clean out."

With a smile James put back the book.

But there was one marked volume he could make nothing of. It consisted of poems by a Matthew Arnold; he did not know the name. One comment struck him : "This man is not blind."

What did she mean? Why was he not blind? and how were others—the great Lord Byron, for instance—blind? What a strange inscription, too!—"To Margaret Gray, house-keeper and farm-girl at Silence Farm : from herself: on her twenty-first birthday : to help her to know herself, now that she is a woman."

He read it again, with a superior smile. It was all very well for a girl.

*"Wheems an' whames
Mak' pretty dames,"*

he hummed, as he put back the book

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It was with some impatience that he looked at a few others unknown to him. It ill became Margaret to set herself up so, he muttered. Then a sudden light of pleasure came into his face, for he saw that "Evangeline" was not there. Margaret must have taken it with her. She was true, then, to her word, that she would never forget the giver, nor the day he gave it, nor what passed between them on that day, nor ever part from it nor go anywhere without it.

He stooped and kissed a glove she had left lying there. By an afterthought he put it in his pocket. Then, with a smile, he turned and left the room.

The hurried breakfast and taciturn parting with his father took but a brief while. The old man seemed preoccupied. It was not till the dogcart was at the door that Mr. Ruthven spoke of what lay so near to the heart of each.

"And remember, James, it's all a question of honour. You keep to your word, an' I'll keep to mine. But if you play me false, don't think I won't learn of it, and don't believe I'll relent. I'm not o' the relentin' sort; my word's my word. An' now good-

Silence Farm

bye, my lad, an' God guard you. Ay, Duncan, whip her up, man ; ye're late as it is. Good-bye—good-bye."

It was not till he was almost at the turn of the Drayboro' road, where the last glimpse can be had of Silence Farm, that James Ruthven looked back.

In the morning sunlight Silence Farm shone peaceful and pleasant. One or two thin wavering columns of blue smoke ascended ; over the thatched byres a cloud of pigeons wheeled. In the pastures, wet with dew, the kye fed or stood idly chewing the cud.

But one figure he saw, and never forgot —a tall, gaunt figure, with white face under locks of iron-gray hair. The sun shone full upon it. The eyes were closed. The lips moved in prayer:

With something of the awe wherewith one looks on the dead or dying, but with more of a dull resentment, he stared his last on Ruthven o' Ruthven—as he was entitled to be called—though the lands o' Ruthven had long gone from him and his.

Was this sorrow-stricken, gray-haired, white-faced man the same who had sprung

Silence Farm

upon him in the dark, and with savage fury fought as though to the death?

The next moment the turn was taken, and the infinite gulf was entered, though it was only by way of the commonplace Drayboro' road.

Perhaps it was the thought of what he would write to Margaret, and of what Margaret would write to him, that kept James Ruthven from brooding too much on that last look of his father, or on all that had led up to that parting ; but before he was in the train he had ceased to trouble much about what had been or was, and concerned himself only with what was to be. And when that night he sat before the fire at Old Grange, and found Martin Comyn as pleasant as his dinner had been, and Kirsten a taking lass with a voice as sweet as a lintie's, he was well content to be away for a time from Silence Farm.

And if he was content, not less so was Archibald Ruthven. That night, for the first time for many nights, he went to his bed without prayers that were an ever-fresh sorrow, and prayed only a grateful thanks. With James gone, and after that talk he had

Silence Farm

had with Margaret, surely all would now be well.

One thing only troubled him. He could not forget Margaret Gray's face when she had said, in answer to some words of his, "And what if I love *him* as he loves *me*, and mayhap with a love greater than his?"

He had not answered that, but had been saved by tears. These had come to his eyes with the sob that rose in his throat, and he knew that his agony had looked out of his life, and that Margaret had been merciful and had said no more.

But now he deemed that the worst was over. God had spared him.

And when, after a week or two, Margaret Gray did come back, and took up her old life at Silence Farm again, Archibald Ruthven knew a period of greater peace than had been his for long. The girl was not the bright Madge of yore; he could not but see that. She was quieter than ever, but withal cheerful and uncomplaining. Once, he knew, she received a letter from James. It was on the day after her return, and Mr. Ruthven came upon her in the wind-haven of the gravel-pit near the Larches, but did not speak

Silence Farm

or reveal his presence because that she was prone on the ground, and was sobbing so that his heart ached with the bitter pain of it.

It was her third letter since James had gone South, and she did not know that the spring and summer of her life were over, and autumn had come, until she had received it.

In that first eager letter—and yet, she felt, not so eager as it read—he had urged her to join him at once. They would go to London, to Canada, Australia perhaps. His half-uncle was a successful man “in wood,” out Manitoba way; his cousin, Robert Aitkin, was a big sheep-farmer in Queensland. Somehow or other, somewhere or other, it would not be difficult to get employment and to make a happy home. But first they would go to London. Almost certainly the “old man” would relent when he knew they had once gone off together. He was obstinate, and had set his heart against their marriage; but when he saw that his only son and his ward had taken the matter into their own hands, he would have the good sense to acquiesce.

“After all,” he added, “the old man is no fool. He needs me at home, or before long

Silence Farm

will find out that he needs me. This Heatherton matter is only to get me out of the way. He has no one to leave his property to except me. I know he's had trouble with money lately, and I think that's one reason he was so anxious I should marry Lizzie Drummond or this girl Kirsten Comyn. No, Madge, my lass, that's not possible after *you*. Kirsten Comyn is all very well in her way, but it's not my way. I wouldn't marry her even if there was no question of your ~~own~~ dear self. No, by the Lord! not for a hundred fathers, or a hundred thousand pounds. I'm not a money-grubber, and I would rather have *you*, Madge, and nothing, than Liz Drummond or Kirsten Comyn with all Scotland at their back."

It was a long letter, but it was all in the same strain. It had tried her sorely. In that dreary house in Linlithgow, whither she had gone to stay with Miss Grainge, a poor and crippled old aunt of Archibald Ruthven, she had cried till her eyes were red. She did love him so. It was her one romance. No other way seemed open to her. That was the rosy way. How gray, how dreary, any other seemed!

Silence Farm

But there was only one answer to be sent, and so she sent it.

"JAMES, MY DEAR, DEAR LOVE," so it began — "If I have not sooner answered your letter, that was because I could not. It made me very unhappy. I am only a loving girl, and so I could not but be glad to hear you love me so well that your love can never change, that there is only one woman in the world for you (ah, Jim, how sweet that is to hear, to read!). But, dear, I am unhappy—oh, so wretchedly, wretchedly unhappy—because of the answer I must send you. Dear, I am only Margaret Gray, a penniless ward of your good father's. At Silence Farm and along the countryside I am Miss Gray, but I never forget that I am really only 'Margaret' to you by sufferance. At any moment I may be Madge the farm-girl, Madge the servant. What could I do? I am not clever enough to be a governess; I need one myself. I am sure I could not make you a fit wife, especially later, when you will be Ruthven o' Ruthven. It would, I need no telling, be a ruin of your chances. Without money

Silence Farm

Silence Farm and much else must go. I can bring you none. Miss Drummond can, or Miss Comyn. But oh, Jim, Jim, my Jamie dear, it isn't only that! I don't know what it is, but there is some overwhelming reason why you and I must not wed. Your father is not a man who would lie. You know that. Still less would he lie when he felt he had a right to command. And it is impossible—*impossible*—he could swear before God that what he urged upon me he urged with an absolute and final reason, unless he *knew* it to be so. I do not understand. My heart is too full of sorrow even to begin to understand. I have not even the small consolation of a hope. For when I said to him that I was strong enough to wait, he flung out upon me like one demented, and said that I ~~strangled~~ his heart when I spoke thus.

“ Dear, do not be so foolish; do not hurt me needlessly by again saying such things as you have said in your letter. You ask me to answer what seems to me to require no answer; but I cannot tell what your need is, and so I answer. There never has been, there never could be, even the dimmest

Silence Farm

approach to any such love on his part as you speak of. How could you think it, James? Well, dear heart, I am not blaming you, but I am sorry you thought such a thing possible. Put it away from you. And to help you to do so for ever I say again: There has never been even a hint that your father cared for me, or wished that I might care for him, in the way you suggest.

"As for Will Johnstone, I can answer only for myself. I do not love him; I never did love him. I like him well enough, and hope he will never forget he has a true well-wisher in Margaret Gray. He is a good, kindly, pleasant lad, and if (as you say) he favours me too much, that I cannot well help. Still, I will see that no mistake can be made. I do not think he wants me to marry him. A girl knows when a man loves her. But if I am wrong, and I find that he does care for me other than as a friend, I will be true to you, true to myself, true to our love. You said to me once that a man might love two women at once, meaning with the same love. I do not believe it, but you may be right. I am not a man. But I am a woman, and from my heart I

Silence Farm

know that, though a woman may have loved two men, she cannot love two men at the same time, in the way you mean, unless she is unworthy of true love and is at heart a wanton.

"So put both these evil dreams from you, James dear. But, now, how am I to end this long letter? I cannot say 'Yes' to what you ask. That is all I want to say now. But you want me to say more.

"James, I cannot—I will not—come away with you. Mr. Ruthven has been a father to me—the only father I have ever known—and, though he is not my father, I cannot regard him as other than that. I owe him everything. For that reason alone it would ill become me to repay him with the most bitter disappointment of his life. No, I could not do it. I would rather be dead. But, besides this, he has talked to me—of his hopes, his prayers. I have promised. I have said that there will be no further question of love between us. I have given my word. You, James, are surely not the man to wish me to break my pledge?

"But I did not say *never*. I said nothing of what might be. He asked, but I would

Silence Farm

not answer. I think he was content ; perhaps he understood more from my silence or my few words than I meant him to understand ; but so it was left.

“ So, dear, while I cannot come to you, while I cannot marry you while your father bans it, I love you, and trust you, and can wait. It may be years, Jamie dear, so I set you free. Unless Mr. Ruthven himself is willing, I will never wed you while he is alive. Nor do I promise to do so when he is dead. There may be some reason against our marriage of which I know nothing. From something he said, I almost fancied there was madness in my family. It may be that—it may be something of the kind ; it may, at any rate, be something that would be as binding on me then as now. So what good to hold you, James ? ... Indeed, I do not. Far from it. I hope you will not forget me, but I hope you will forget that you have loved me in the way you do ; at least, that you will find another woman whom you can love long and well, and with whom you can be content.

“ But if, despite all, you feel as I do, and find that love itself, such as ours, is best, and

Silence Farm

that you can wait, on so bare a hope—then, my dear, dear love, I can only say that I am always and for ever, as now,

“ Your loyal and loving
“ MARGARET.”

How much she repented, how much she hoped to hear, after she had sent that letter !

When, on the third day, the awaited answer came, she could not read it at first. It was not till an hour after breakfast that she opened the envelope ; but in that hour she lived the bitter-sweet agony of young love, and flushed at times with sudden tremors of joy, and at times grew pale with vague and unfamiliar trepidations.

She was white enough when she had read the letter.

“ You call yourself in love,” it began, and without prefatory word of love or courtesy. “ You call yourself in love ! Why, I don’t believe you know what love means. It’s milk that runs in YOUR veins. There’s been too much of the dairy-lass in you from the first. And after all I’ve done for you—not a word of gratitude for all I’ve given you in

Silence Farm

the way of books and what not, an' helped you to think for yourself, and put books in your way that you love now, but would never have heard of but for me!

" But no, no, damn it, Madge! I am not going to reproach you more. I love you, my girl. Come, Madge, come, dear lass. My heart aches for you. There's no life for me without you. Dear Madge, you're the sweetest woman in the world. And I tell you straight that if you don't, it's all over with me. I know that well enough. I can't stay vegetating here. I'm a *man*, Margaret, not a potato. I'll go to the bad, as sure 's death. Don't let me do that. Look here, Madge: I am not to be played with. Either you love me or you don't. If you do, you'll not return to Silence Farm, but join me at Berwick as I proposed; or, if you like, I'll come to Edinburgh. We can be married there or in London. London would be best. By the Lord, I'll give you a good time there! It will be all right. We'll marry as soon as possible. But, Margaret, my lass, let me tell you this: if you say no, *I'm done with you*. No more nonsense for me. It's a duel between that old man's obstinacy and my

Silence Farm

love. You must choose. But there's to be no more nonsense, I tell you. By God, no! Have me or leave me. The more I think of it, the less I think of *your* kind of love. I want a woman, not a girl who's afraid o' this, afraid o' that, who's all for love but daren't, because papa sneezes or mamma sniffs. So understand well : I won't write again. Have my love or throw it away ; come or stay ; be my one and only darling girl, or make me hate the very name o' you as a wanton, callous jade. But no—I trust you, my girl, my own dear lass. Awaiting your answer,

“ Your loving

“ JIM.”

If it was hard to read, it was hard to answer. What, she said over and over again to herself—what could she say more than she had already said? She had said all. If he did not understand the letter she had sent, could he ever understand?

It was not a woman's way, of that she felt sure ; but it might be the way with men. Love meant less to them, if the ways of love seemed to mean so much more. She could not understand a letter such as she had

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received from the man who loved her. She would not let herself call it cruel, or even selfish; she would not see what peeped at her from every sentence; he was wildly in love, and it was his way—not the best way, not a fine way, but perhaps man's way, and in any case his way.

But one thing she could do. She would speak again to Mr. Ruthven. She would have her surety made absolute with double surety. So she wrote simply :

"I will write to you from Silence Farm when I return. Meanwhile bear with me. If I can make your father relent, then with joy I will write to you. If not, I cannot change. Do not write to me here again meanwhile. I leave to-night, and go to an old friend elsewhere, where I can be alone in a way that's impossible for me here. I want to think a great deal about you and myself."

Thereafter not a word had passed between them till the three weeks were almost over, and then she sent the briefest word :

"JAMES, DEAR LOVE,—I go home tomorrow. Let me have a line from you. Do

Silence Farm

you still wish me to come to you, after all I have said? O Jamie—Jamie—I . . .”

That was all. Unfinished, tear-wet, as it was, and she all unthinking what she was doing, what revealing, she thrust it into an envelope, nor was it till after she had posted it that she cried out, “Oh, my God, what folly it is! I dare not—I dare not!”

Yet, for all her regret, something sang in her heart. All the way from Edinburgh to Wardlaw Junction a rose of flame was on her face; the autumn robins had not brighter eyes. Ah, that letter! whatever came of it, it would appeal to him, it would show him her woman's heart, it would . . .

But when the dogcart which had been sent to meet her drove down the Muirton road, and she came suddenly in sight of Silence Farm once more, her heart sank. The place seemed more solitary, more lonely than ever. She felt as an old woman returning to a birthplace whence she would not depart again. In the gray afternoon, Silence Farm had that inevitable look which some places have, or that we see in them: it is there we are to live; it is there we are to grow

Silence Farm

old in weariness and the dull round of unchanging days.

All thought of speaking to Mr. Ruthven that night went from her when once she was home again. Glad as he was to see her, Mr. Ruthven was obviously worried and preoccupied. He had aged greatly, she thought. Next morning she saw that he had aged more even than she had surmised, and yet he was blither, less sombre and stern at least, than she had known him for long.

She was putting some late wall-flowers into a jug, when the parlour door opened, and the house-girl handed in a letter. Mr. Ruthven took it.

By the frown on his face and the sudden ashen look, she knew that the letter was from James, and that it was for her.

Should she speak at once? she wondered. She knew what Jim's answer would be. It might be best to speak first.

"What has my son James to say to you, Margaret?"

She looked at Mr. Ruthven. His face was set and stern. Silently she took the letter from his hand and opened it.

Mr. Ruthven watched Margaret while she

Silence Farm

read the letter. He saw a perplexing change come into her face. It was as though she aged visibly. "It was a mistake, of course," he said to himself; "the lass is put out about something—that is why the lines about her eyes and mouth show that quick, subtle difference."

"Well?" he asked, when she had read and replaced it.

"It's nothing particular, uncle. I think your son is well content where he is."

"Does he, who has not had time to write to his father, say nothing more to you?"

"Nothing that matters."

"Does he ask you to do anything, Margaret?"

"To do anything?"

"Yes."

"No; he does not ask me to do anything."

"Be frank, girl; what does he write to you about?"

"About himself."

"Will you let me see the letter?"

"No, Mr. Ruthven."

"Why not?"

"It is to me, not to you."

"But it is about him—my son."

Silence Farm

"It is also about a woman."

"Ah-h!"

There was silence for a minute. Was it about Kirsten Comyn, or perhaps, after all, Lizzie Drummond? No . . . why, how foolish not to have thought of it! more than likely Margaret had heard of the fate of her friend, Jean Dunlop. She had perhaps written to James about it: his answer had saddened, angered her.

"Do you know the woman?"

"I knew her."

"Knew her? Then she is dead?"

"Yes; the woman I knew is dead."

"And James . . . does he . . . what does he say?"

"I have forgotten. It does not matter. I think he will now marry Miss Drummond, or this other girl, or anyone you want."

"But . . ."

The sentence was unfinished, for Margaret turned to the fire and thrust the letter between two flaming coals.

"I'm real glad to be back again at Silence Farm. An' now I'm off to take the round of the dairies an' the byres. There's a lot to see to."

Silence Farm

" Margaret, my girl, Margaret," Mr. Ruthven cried, as she left the room, " just tell me this : are ye well content to bide here wi' an auld man?"

" I'm well content."

She hesitated, came back and kissed him, and then abruptly left the room.

Chapter IX

SOME weeks after Margaret's return to Silence Farm a crushing blow fell on the last "Laird o' Ruthven."

The first snow had fallen, and December, with its bitter moorland storms and drear days, was at hand.

Margaret never heard the whole story. It was enough that the disaster had come and was irretrievable. For some years Mr. Ruthven had been more and more involved in financial difficulties; latterly he had been forced to realize everything that possibly could be realized, and even Silence Farm had been mortgaged up to the hilt—"Ay, an' right into the hollow of my hand," as he added.

At this juncture the man whom he trusted above all others, an Edinburgh lawyer named Israel Smith, had made away with every farthing that he had in trust, and had dis-

Silence Farm

appeared with the heavy sums he had robbed from his old friend and many other clients.

Everywhere the mortgages were foreclosing. There was no possibility of stemming the tide. Before the crash had come he had strained his resources to the utmost ; there was not a bank in Muirton or Drayboro', in Edinburgh or Glasgow, which would help him with a fifty-pound note. Everything would have to go, even Silence Farm.

The one gleam of hope was in the offer of a great neighbouring laird, the Earl of Kinrye. If Mr. Ruthven would sell Silence Farm to him at once, as it stood, he would give a sum certainly much beyond what the house and lands would fetch by public sale. He wanted the place for his nephew, Andrew Morton, who had returned bankrupt from Australia, and must be set on his legs again. This offer promised to leave a small sum over after all debts had been paid—enough to keep starvation or abject penury at bay. The hardship was in the immediate clearance.

In these few days after the worst had become known, Mr. Ruthven passed swiftly from power to weakness, from virile life to

Silence Farm

senile decay. Outwardly, though whiter in the hair and grayer in the face, and more silent than ever, there was not at first so great a change ; but the rapid ageing within soon told.

Eager to clinch the bargain, the Earl came over himself one day. He was touched by the old man's silent, unspeakable grief. When he realized that Mr. Ruthven clung with a passionate tenacity to the last remaining lands of his fathers, and that he was set upon dying in his own place, and yet that he would have no option but the poor-house if he did not take the exceptionally high offer for Silence Farm, Lord Kinrye made a generous proposal.

At the far end of the farm-lands, south-eastward, and out of sight of Silence Farm, rises Drayboro' Moor—a dreary region, but with some arable tracts in it, and with good pasture-lands here and there. On this particular tract, known as Ruthven's March, there was a small croft, called Moss Dykes. The house was only a broken-down cottage, on a bleak moorland croft, and with a lean-to byre ; but it was on the old Ruthven lands, and had belonged to the family for many

Silence Farm

generations. Latterly it had been occupied by one of Mr. Ruthven's shepherds, but was now vacant, for the man had left the bankrupt to seek a living elsewhere.

"You can have Moss Dykes, Mr. Ruthven," said Lord Kinrye kindly. "I'll let you have it and the small farm free for your life. It's a poor change for you to go there from Silence Farm, but it is better than . . . than . . ."

"The poor-house, my lord."

"Ah, well, I hope not so bad as that—not so bad as that, Mr. Ruthven. But you will at least be on your own ground there. You'll still be Ruthven o' Ruthven. And with that free for your life, and your son to help you to make the best of the moor-farm, with what will be over to the good after you have paid off all your debts, you will be independent of anyone, and that means much to a man like yourself, Mr. Ruthven."

"Ay, my lord, it means much. Nothing else now seems to me to mean much, but that means much—God forgive the sinful, foolish pride that can make an old and broken man care where it is that he dies."

"Come, come, Mr. Ruthven, there's no

Silence Farm

call to talk o' dying yet for many a long day. You've had a bad fall, but there aren't many men on the countryside of your age who could do what you can do, or look as strong and good for the struggle as you look."

"I'm tired o' that struggle, Lord Kinrye. But that's neither here nor there. I thank you for your offer. It's a generous offer, for Moss Dykes goes with Silence Farm, and you have already offered me a higher price than I could get elsewhere. Since your lordship's so kind, I accept. It means much to me to spend my last years—whether it's days or months or years—on my own land, though it's only a moor-croft."

"Well, shake hands on that. This is Friday. On Wednesday Mr. Morton wants to move in. Thursday's the New Year, you see. It would be best for you, too, Mr. Ruthven," he added gently.

"Ay, much best. Mr. Morton can come when he likes on Wednesday. I'll see to getting Moss Dykes ready for us at once; it will be a hard push, but we'll do it; an' I'll say good-bye to Silence Farm before noon on Wednesday. Mr. Morton will find every-

Silence Farm

thing in order, since you've bought the furniture an' all. We'll take away only the few things that are our own, an' what's absolutely necessary over yonder. Bedclothes, an' pots an' pans an' the like, will be at a valuation, of course. . . ."

"No, no; say no more about that, Mr. Ruthven. That's a trifle; I buy the house as it stands, but I don't mean that you're to go to Moss Dykes without knife an' fork, pots an' pans, an' a blanket to cover you. Bless you, no, my good sir! And, by the way, Mr. Ruthven, I've spoken to my nephew —a rough man, and somewhat coarse in his ways, but good at heart, as well as a capital farmer, I hope—about Miss Gray."

Mr. Ruthven flashed a startled glance at the speaker.

"What about Miss Gray?"

"To give her a good post at Silence Farm. You won't want her now, I suppose; and she is a good and able girl, I hear; and by the looks of her, and her refined manners, a lady, I can myself truly vouch."

Mr. Ruthven drew himself up.

"She *is* a lady, my lord."

"Ay . . . is that so?"

Silence Farm

“Yes. And if you will not take as discourteous what is not meant so, I’ll add that her folk were up high when the Mortons of Kinrye were poor countryside lairds.”

Lord Kinrye looked curiously at the speaker.

“Ah-h,” he said slowly. “H’m! . . . well, perhaps the least said about that now the better. By the way, she’s no relation of yours, is she, Mr. Ruthven?”

“She’s my ward. I’ve always taken care of her ever since she was a child. An’ she’s lived with me—well, more as my adopted daughter, or as a niece, we’ll say, ever since her mother died.”

“But no relation . . . no relation?”

“It is very kind of your lordship and of Mr. Morton,” answered Mr. Ruthven, ignoring the question; “but there’s no call for Miss Gray to go into service.”

“Tut, tut, man! ye needn’t put it that way. There’s no talk of her going as a servant. She might be housekeeper, if it weren’t that Mr. Morton’s crippled sister mightn’t like it. But I proposed that she should take charge of the dairies and the dairy produce.”

Silence Farm

"I thank you again, but Miss Gray will come to Moss Dykes with me."

"Have you spoken to her about this?"

"There's no need to speak."

"H'm!"

Mr. Ruthven rose and rang the bell. The house-girl appeared.

"Jessie, tell Miss Gray I want her here."

When Margaret came in, Lord Kinrye rose and offered her a chair. He looked curiously at the girl. "What a handsome lass!" he thought. She was dressed in a soft gray woollen dress, with white cuff-bands like those of a hospital nurse, and in the white lawn at her throat was a freshly-gathered monthly-rose. Taller than the average, strongly built, shapely, with her finely-moulded features, deep violet-gray eyes, and wealth of lustrous brown hair, she would look well anywhere. The reflection rather than the definite thought passed through his mind that neither Lady Kinrye nor his daughter Agnes could compare with this farm-girl. Agnes Morton was common and dowdy. This girl was in looks and bearing, for all that her hands were coarser than they would be if she had lived an idler

Silence Farm

life, of good birth. He sighed, without quite knowing why.

In a few words Mr. Ruthven explained how matters stood.

"And now, Margaret, Lord Kinrye is good enough to suggest that you should stay on at Silence Farm, and take charge of the dairy-work. You will have a good position and good wages. Do you agree?"

"And you?"

"I leave it wholly with you."

"I do not mean that. I mean, what are *you* going to do?"

"I go to Moss Dykes, as I have told you."

"Alone?"

"That is as you decide."

"Mr. Ruthven, how can you even suggest such a thing? I would go out on the roads and beg or sing for you, rather than leave you now in your bitter trouble!"

"I knew it, my lass. Are you quite satisfied, my lord?"

"Quite. Miss Gray, allow me to shake hands with you, and to say that you can always count upon me as a friend. You are a brave and good girl."

Silence Farm

"I do not quite understand what your lordship means. There is no question of bravery or goodness. What else could I do? But I thank you for your goodwill, my lord."

So thus it was left. The only other suggestion that Lord Kinrye made was that James Ruthven should be sent for, now that the Heatherton Ha' farm-lands had been bought by Mr. Comyn, so as to farm the croft at Moss Dykes. To his surprise, Mr. Ruthven vehemently opposed any such idea.

"Tell him, then, that if he'll come to Kinrye I'll give him the assistant-factorship. Mr. Gordon is getting old, and is somewhat failing at present. Let him come home and talk it over with you. If he'll agree, I'll give him two hundred a year; and as he will have bed and board free at the Castle, and no expenses, he can easily let you have at least a hundred."

For the first time in the interview Archibald Ruthven lost something of his stern mien. His eyes were wet as he shook Lord Kinrye's hand. "Perhaps," he murmured—"perhaps, after all, God has wrought this

Silence Farm

sorrow and trouble upon me in order to save greater suffering, and to bring me to a haven of peace before the end."

In the end a letter, telling all, was written. "So come," it said at the close, "and spend this New Year with Margaret and myself at our sad new home. I am penniless now, and must leave Margaret a pauper unless you will help us both in the way Lord Kinrye suggests. He has behaved nobly throughout, and may God reward him!"

The next few days were sad indeed. When all was done that could be done by him, Mr. Ruthven wandered over every acre of Silence Farm. There was not a fairy-ring in the pastures, not a thorn-hedge, not a tree anywhere from the orchard to the Larches, of which he did not take farewell. In the silent evenings he sat staring into the fire. Sometimes he looked at Margaret. "I'd never have thought," he muttered, "that she'd have felt it so much. She's sore wrought by it, poor lass!"

Margaret, however, was thinking little about Silence Farm.

On the last night of their life there—and already almost all their few personal belong-

Silence Farm

ings had been removed, the last thing to go having been Mr. Ruthven's secretaire-desk, which with difficulty had been got into the stuffy little room that was to be his bedroom at Moss Dykes—he looked up suddenly.

Margaret was sitting in the other armchair. Her hands lay listlessly on her lap; her eyes were closed; utter despondency weighed upon her. But at the first word he spoke this outward dejection vanished. Strength and youth and her old characteristic dauntlessness came back as swiftly as though she had stepped from one ledge to another.

She rose and stood beside him. With a caressing touch she smoothed the gray and white tangled hair, and, stooping abruptly, kissed him on the brow.

"God bless you, my lass! You're a good lass, Madge. Do play, Margaret. I'll never hear another note o' music. This is my last night for't. Open the old spinnet, an' play to me for the last time."

Without a word Margaret went over to the cottage piano, and removed some books and papers from its top. Seating herself on a chair, for there was no stool, she played softly.

Silence Farm

Outside the snow was falling, and a moaning wind rose and fell with continuous weary sough. Within, the fire leaped cheerily. She shuddered slightly as she thought of the change in store, but her thought was for the old man who sat there so sudden-aged and so weary. What would the New Year bring? What would James . . .

Old familiar airs she played, one slipping into the other as though all were but rising and falling strains of one sad and exquisite monotony.

Once she sang. Her voice was low and sweet. It was an old song, remembered from childhood :

*Wha calls across the lonely lands?
Wha rides athrough the gloaming drear?
Is't waves that cry along the sands,
Or whirlin' whaup that cries mair near?*

*It's no a bird that wheels and cries,
Or moanin' wave on ony shore:
Wha rides abroad neath gloamin' skies
Rides slow, for she sall ride no more.*

*My ain true love, my ain true love,
What gars ye ride sae far an' lone?
My ain truc love, my ain true love,
My heart braks wi' your moan.*

Margaret let her fingers lie idly on the still notes. She, too, dreamed her dream.

Silence Farm

A sob startled her.

Mr. Ruthven lay half fallen on the table, his head on his arms. Heavy sobs shook him.

“ What is’t, what is’t, Mr. Ruthven? What is’t, dear Uncle Archibald?”

He looked up with woe-wrought face and streaming eyes. “ Her name was yer ain, my lass,” he said hoarsely—“ Margaret, Margaret, my ain true love.”

Chapter X

ON the last day of the year Archibald Ruthven saw little of Silence Farm. A storm of rain and sleet had swept the moorland from daybreak, and by the forenoon a damp mist hid everything from view.

In the cheerless walk from the house to Moss Dykes not a word was spoken. Mr. Ruthven had not waited for the arrival of Mr. Morton. When the postman had arrived at breakfast-time he had brought two letters. Both lay on the table unopened. A glance had shown the broken laird that there was still no word from his son. Sick at heart at the continued callousness, he had no heed of other matters.

Margaret flushed with anger when she realized what it was that had brought the twitch into that white, worn, rugged face. "It's a bitter sorrow, the heart of a selfish man," she muttered. Mr. Ruthven said nothing, but the tightened scarlet lips, the

Silence Farm

twitch at the mouth, the dour-looking eyes, told their own tale. At last, with a weary sigh, he lifted his letters. One he read with hard eyes and stern face—a letter of reproach from an over-godly elder of the kirk to which he belonged. The other was from Andrew Morton to say that he could not be at Silence Farm until two in the afternoon or later, but that Mrs. Robertson the cook would have all ready for him, and that Mr. Ruthven was not to delay his going, unless he wished to stay.

He was glad to get away thus unnoticed. When he and Margaret left, there was not a single person to witness their going. He said good-bye to Mrs. Robertson in the kitchen. The good woman had sent the house-girl out to the byres, and she herself sat with her Shetland shawl drawn over her head, crying silently.

He and Margaret walked side by side down the gravel path. When they came to the gate that opened on to the Drayboro' road, the girl swiftly advanced, let him pass, and closed it again. Yet she could not prevent the click, and she saw that the sound struck him as might the ~~sing~~ of a whip. It was the last word of Silence Farm.

Silence Farm

When once they had passed the corner of the road both knew a relief. There was nothing to look back to, for all that the mist had now lifted. Beyond was the rutted road, the frequent narrow pools in it reflecting with a metallic sheen the lowering skies.

The cart was waiting for them, as Margaret had privately arranged. There was room only for one, for at the last some articles had been forgotten. The old man signed to her to mount, but she shook her head. Obedient to her whisper and gentle pressure, he got in, and sat on the loose shelf, among the baggage, behind Peter Strang, the carter.

The grizzled and bent old farm labourer did not look round. It was as little his place to look on fallen greatness in its hour of misery as to speak till he was spoken to. He flicked the rope rein over the old white horse, and the cart jolted on.

Margaret walked alongside. Her thoughts centred upon the letter from James that would be waiting at Moss Dykes for Mr. Ruthven : or upon James being there himself. But over and over again she thought of that last letter of his to herself—so wanton, so cruel,

Silence Farm

so scornful. Was she really not a true woman? Was she "cold as a fladdock," as he called her? Was she "a fool that had yet got to learn the extent of her folly"?

"No, no, no!" she muttered once, so that the old man in the cart heard the murmur, "it's not true. *I am* a woman—I *have* got a woman's heart; for it's broken, an' that couldn't be if I hadn't one to break. An' I have done what's right—I've done what's best."

"What's that you're saying, Margaret?"

The girl looked at him with loving, pitying eyes. How old and feeble and broken he was! and that fretful quaver in his voice, it was that of a poor auld body.

"I was saying it's doubtless all for the best. We'll have a happy home yet at Moss Dykes, an' I'll never, never leave you. There's no man in the world, Mr. Ruthven, Uncle Archie dear, that could make me leave you."

"God bless you, my lass! You're my one comfort in my broken days."

After that no more was said. In half an hour or less the cart jumbled on to the rough stony by-path which led from the main road

Silence Farm

to Moss Dykes. Margaret's skirts were soaked in the wet heather, and clung chillily about her legs and ankles. She had already arranged that old Mrs. Strang was to be at the croft, and have the kitchen fire bright, and tea laid on a clean cloth on the deal table.

In the darkening gloom, raw and drear, the poor stone cottage looked homely enough. A lamp shone from the table, and the kitchen was bright and warm. The kettle hissed on the hearth, and a big loaf lay beside the brown jenny and a pat of fresh butter. A large boiled ham, heavily sprinkled with brown breadcrumb, and tied at the shank with a blue ribbon, caught Margaret's eye at once; and in reply to her curious glance, Mrs. Strang told her that it was a present from Mrs. Robertson, bought and cooked by herself for "the master."

Before she left, the old woman lifted a big double-lidded market-basket. Drawing Margaret aside, she whispered her loving secret, with many mysterious nods.

"It's a yen, Miss Gray—a good layin' Brunsick. Guid sakes, my dear, dinna say a word mair aboot it. The puir auld man

Silence Farm

maun hae his egg i' the morn, ye ken.
Ye'll ha' fowls in plenty sune, I dinna doot,
but this is jist to stait him off, ye ken. Oh
ay, Peter an' me can spare it a' richt. God's
been guid to us, for we're auld, an' we'll be
able to dee awa' frae the workus. It's a'
richt. 'An' see here, my bonnie, in this side
there's a kitten for ye—a bonnie bit beastie,
like a dish o' cream wi' treacle oozin' thro'
it. I've pit a bit o' ribbon roon its neck, an'
it looks as braw as yersel'. It'll comfort ye
to see it rinnin' aboot.'

It was not till after the old woman had left—sweet, charitable, gracious, loving heart of the poor—that Margaret found also, beside her plate, a faded, heavy, scentless, but doubtless dearly-cherished sachet, relic of a remote heyday of youth and pride, and a quarter-pound packet of fat peppermint lozenges.

She needed all the comfort she could get. There had been no letter from James, either to Mr. Ruthven or herself; but she had at once cheered the old man by taking the bright view of the matter, and assuring him the silence only meant that James would be with them that night, or at latest on the morrow.

Silence Farm

Mr. Ruthven was worn out by three sleepless nights ; and the cold journey in the bleak moorland air, along with the warmth of the fire, brought a heavy sleepiness. Shortly after that first quiet and not unhappy meal, he seated himself in the wide hearth-side chair before the fire, and was soon sound asleep.

Margaret went to the door, and stared long across the dreary uplands. The raw, damp winter-gloaming was fast merging into darkness, but she could see the mists rising from the soaked heather, and the glisten of the wet farm-path as it wound towards the unseen mainroad. If Silence Farm had often seemed to her remote, how far more remote now seemed Moss Dykes !

Was James on that road now ? she wondered. Surely, or on his way there. What would she say to him when at last they were alone ? Perhaps now Mr. Ruthven, so broken and oblivious, would no longer bitterly oppose their marriage. Would James care to settle down to that prospect prepared for him by Lord Kinrye ? Would he come to the help of his broken father ? Would he keep troth to a penniless girl like

Silence Farm

herself? These and other thoughts, familiar and yet always so poignantly unresolved, filled her mind.

With a sigh she stepped across the threshold, and walked along the wet flagstones to the lean-to byre. All their present wealth was there now, though it consisted only of a brown cow and of a black sow with a litter. She entered the ill-kept byre, and sat down to milk Russet. The poor beast was mournful also, she thought; and no wonder, after the fine and warm byres at Silence Farm.

They had to begin at once and live with scrupulous care. In order to buy in Russet and the sow, nearly all the small remaining spare cash had to be expended. But on this first night Margaret was determined that the old man should eat and sleep well, and was glad to think that out of her own scanty purse she had laid in enough for a house-warming, "and for the New Year, when there'll be three of us."

By nine o'clock it was clear that James could not be there that night, so the door and windows were fastened. Mr. Ruthven woke only to undress, and at once fell into

Silence Farm

a deep slumber again ; but Margaret lay long awake. The wind had risen and moaned about the solitary croft. Often it came in sudden swirls, and buffeted the little stone house. In the slits in the dishevelled byre it screamed like a tortured creature, or wailed in lonely pain and bewilderment.

When sleep did come to her, she woke again and again with tear-wet eyes ; but at last she too slept profoundly.

Both rose cheerily with the new day, their first at Moss Dykes, the first day of a new year. And again, when no letter came, Margaret made quite sure that James would be with them soon.

Mr. Ruthven looked at the girl curiously. Was it for him she was so anxious, he wondered ? If, after all, there was the least chance that Margaret Gray still had a love-thought for his son ; if James, for any reason, hoped . . . No, no ! he had put away all that tragic mischance from his mind. Nevertheless, he watched Margaret uneasily.

An hour or so after breakfast, as Margaret was feeding the half-dozen fowls that the carrier had brought from Silence Farm, she saw a tattered laddie hurrying up the farm-

Silence Farm

way. She knew him to be Willie Baird, the grandson of old Mrs. Baird who kept the post-office at Wardlaw-on-the-Muir, the nearest place whence a telegram could come.

She went eagerly to meet the boy. The telegram was to Mr. Ruthven. She took it to him where he sat by the kitchen-table, overlooking recent vouchers and valuations.

“Here is a telegram, Uncle Archibald. I suppose it’s from James, to say he’ll be here later.”

Telegrams were so rare in that remote region that Mr. Ruthven looked startled, and opened the brown envelope with some trepidation. Margaret watched him closely.

He frowned, with that old, sombre, stern expression she knew so well. Then, surely, a look as of infinite relief came into his eyes. The next moment his face clouded again.

“The telegram is from James, Margaret,” he said quietly.

“Yes; is he coming?”

“No.”

She put her hand to her mouth and bit a nail perplexedly.

“Why not?”

Silence Farm

"He does not telegraph from Heatherton.
He telegraphs from Carlisle."

"From Carlisle?" the girl repeated amazedly.

"I will read you what he says: 'Regret smash up. Must look out for myself now. Yesterday Kirsten Comyn and I were privately married at Berwick.'

Margaret put her left hand to her heart. Her face had suddenly become as white as the milk in the bowl which stood on the table beside her.

Mr. Ruthven glanced at her, but made no comment. "Poor lass!" he said in his heart.

"Read it again," she whispered.

When she heard it again, she repeated mechanically: "'Yesterday Kirsten Comyn and I were privately married at Berwick.' He . . . James . . . won't be here to-day, then?" she added stupidly.

"Of course not, lass: how could he?"

"I don't understand," she said hoarsely.

"What don't you understand?"

"About . . . about James. Surely he can't have had Lord Kinrye's message?"

"No," answered Mr. Ruthven gloomily; "he must have left Heatherton as soon

Silence Farm

as he heard of my bankruptcy. I wonder what Martin Comyn will do?"

"Martin Comyn?"

"Yes, yes, girl—Martin Comyn. Are ye doited? If he puts up wi' James goin' off wi' his daughter like that, the lad may yet get the place at Kinrye Chase."

"And what about *you*, Uncle Archibald? What help will your son be able to give you if he has to keep a wife as well as himself—and now, too, he'd have to live somewhere else than in the Castle."

"True. It's a sair disappointment. But I'm glad . . . my God! I am glad, Margaret Gray . . . that he's married."

"Ay, sir"—and, as Margaret spoke with abrupt and unwonted bitterness, the old man looked at her morosely—"anything so long as he doesn't marry Margaret Gray!"

"Margaret!"

"Well?"

"My lass, you're worth a dozen Jameses. But son of mine as he is, I'd rather see him dead at my feet, I'd rather see you both dead at my feet, than that you should be in Kirsten Comyn's place."

"I don't understand," added the girl

Silence Farm

wearily and dispassionately. "But it doesn't matter now—nothing matters. But tell me this: if Mr. Comyn doesn't forgive his daughter, and will have naught more to do with either her or . . . or . . . her husband, what then?"

"What then?" Mr. Ruthven stopped, then added grimly: "Ye can read this telegram again. What is't he says? '*Must look out for myself now.*' Well, that's what he'll have to do."

But they had not long to speculate, for while they were still discussing or pondering, each with a bitter ache at the heart, but with a deeper hurt in the heart of the woman, they heard a knock at the door. Adam Semple, the carrier, had driven his cart near, and had himself approached unheard.

"Oh, it's you, Adam?" said Margaret. "We didn't expect to see anyone to-day, and you least of all, as it's New Year's Day an' you're having a holiday."

"That's so, Miss Gray; but I had to drive the missus to Wardlaw Junction, as she's gone awa' to Falkirk to see her sister, wha's deein' o' a tumour as big 's yer fist, an' on my way hame Mrs. Baird o' the post-

Silence Farm

office ca'd to me, an' gied me thae twa letters, which itherwise ye wudna get till the morn. No, I'll no stop the noo ; another time, thank ye, Mr. Ruthven. Eh . . . oh, weel, since ye're sae pressin', Mr. Ruthven, an' it's the New Year, I'll jist hae a thimmelfu'. Here's to ye, Mr. Ruthven, an' to you too, Miss Gray, an' a happy New Year to you baith !—Ma certy, sir," he added, with kindly courtesy, "it's a fine, quiet, wee place ye hae here ; for mysel', I'd rather hae Moss Dykes than ony place I ken o'. Well, I wish ye happy days here, Mr. Ruthven, an' guid luck."

As soon as Adam Semple had gone, Mr. Ruthven opened the letters.

The first was from Martin Comyn.

" MY DEAR RUTIIVEN,

" I am very sorry to have to tell you that a break must come in our old friendship. Your son has induced my daughter Kirsten to run away with him. This I might make the best of but for two reasons. He had been carrying on with her for some time past, but on the day after he heard of your disasters (as I have since learned) he took a

Silence Farm

base advantage of my girl, who otherwise would have drawn back from a penniless, thriftless man like James Ruthven, and so forced her to agree. You will wonder why he did this, knowing that I could and almost certainly would cut her off without a farthing ; but he had found out that she had a thousand pounds in her own right, a six-months-ago legacy from her aunt Mary. He has gone, and she after him. Poor fool ! she thought I would give way when I heard what had happened. I have written to her, and have told her that she has made her bed and must lie on it. I will never see her again, or give or leave her a farthing. She has broken my life—she, my only child ! And I told her that yesterday I met Lord Kinrye at Castleton Fair, and that when he spoke to me about James Ruthven I told him what had happened, and that my lord at once said he would have nothing more to do with your son. So now they can go where they will and do what they will. If I had any idea of what might have come to pass, I would never have let your son come to my house in that intimate way ; but you told me that you meant to start him well in life, and

Silence Farm

I supposed you knew well that you were solvent, and you added that you hoped to see him Laird o' Heatherton before his time came to be Laird o' Ruthven and to take your place at Silence Farm. But even in the short time he was at Heatherton I could see he was a wastrel and born idler and gad-about. Now that your son is worse off than yourself, and has lost that good post at Lord Kinrye's, I don't suppose he will be able to do anything for you, and, from what I have seen of him, I should fancy he's too selfish to do it any way, and still less now that he has handicapped himself with a wife, whose thousand pounds—or what will be left of it, for he left penniless or with borrowed money—won't go far. I am sorry for you, too. You have been deeply to blame with this son of yours, especially after that scandal with Dunlop's daughter ; but I am very sorry for you now that so many troubles have come upon you. But for myself I'll never hear the name of Ruthven mentioned in my house. Your son has put a curse upon it. God alive, man, if there had even been a bit of romance in it ! But that scoundrel simply thought of himself. The moment he realized

Silence Farm

you were bankrupt, and, of course, he knew nothing of Lord Kinrye's generous idea for him, he thought of making himself secure with *something*. He knew I would never agree to let my girl marry him, a beggar and wastrel, and he knew Kirsten would have nothing to do with him, for she didn't care for more than a silly, foolish flirtation. I'm sure o' that. So he made sure of her, damn him! Curse his cowardly devilry! Well, I'm done with them both. And so good-bye, Archibald Ruthven, for, though you're innocent of this wrong done to me and mine, I can't forget that it's your son who has done it, and that it was your folly that sent him here. You know that I ken all about what happened once in your own life, and though you did what you could—and in one respect with folly, as I hold it—I am inclined to think that the Lord is making you pay now for that old account. Whatever the law of the land is, the law of the spirit is to call in accounts soon or late, and the later the calling the heavier the settlement.

“MARTIN COMYN.”

Silence Farm

Archibald Ruthven read the letter through without outward sign beyond the stiffening of the lines in his white face and the hardening of his eyes.

Margaret watched him anxiously. She knew that bad news had come.

"Is it . . . is it . . . about James?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"About whom?"

"About your son?"

"Ye mean about James Ruthven? Yes, it's about James Ruthven. I have no son. May God do unto him as he has done unto others! Ay, may God curse him! May he know the bitter, bitter way! May he grow old, so that he may know the full taste o't! May he . . ."

"Hush! Hush! Mr. Ruthven, hush! He's your son—he's your son. And remember, too, remember this is the New Year, an' we should wish no evil on this day."

"Evil—no evil on this day! Are ye doited, girl? Evil on this day! Hell's opened, I tell ye! God curse this day an' all days! Oh, my God, my God, I wish that I had died lang syne!"

But with a choking sob the strength of

Silence Farm

the old broken man gave way. He swayed forward, and his head fell heavily on the table. Margaret moved swiftly to his side. She lifted him back until his head leaned against the chair, and then unfastened his vest and collar. In a few seconds she had a bottle of hartshorn out of the little box of household remedies she had brought from Silence Farm, and with this and her caressing hands and words she soon brought Mr. Ruthven round again.

He opened his eyes, stared vacantly, and at last remembered. With a heavy sigh, he took Margaret's right hand in his, and stroked it gently.

"May God forgive me, and you too, Margaret, my dear! It was madness that came upon me; I did not know what I was saying. There are too many curses in this weary world for a broken an' dying man to add to them. An' as for Martin Comyn, may-hap he'll be feeling the same way by now. I've no ill will to him, forbye that it was he, or he in part, who's turned away Kinrye's help from James an' us. As for James, it's a bitter, sore grief. I can say 'no more.'"

Silence Farm

"Do you feel his marriage like that, Uncle Archibald? I thought you wished it."

"Read that letter, Margaret. But don't speak to me about it. Read it, an' then put it in the fire. I've no need to read it again myself; every word o't 's in my heart."

"Yes, dear, I will. But you have not opened your other letter; perhaps there is better news there."

Mr. Ruthven took up the envelope.

"I don't know the writing. It's from . . . from . . . is't Carluke? . . . no, frae Carlisle."

Margaret's breath caught. The letter must be from Kirsten, James Ruthven's wife.

Mr. Ruthven read it swiftly and with scornful eyes.

"Margaret."

"Yes?"

"Ye can read this too. It's from a woman I don't know and never want to know. Her name is Kirsten Ruthven."

Chapter XI

MARGARET was about to read the letter, when she heard the scrunch of a horse as it scrambled up the rough, rain-loosened farm-road.

"Is that James?" cried Mr. Ruthven abruptly, his heart having far out-leaped his mind.

Margaret made no answer. She went to the door, and stood. A horseman rode up to the flagstones, and sat looking fixedly at the girl.

"Good-day, Miss Gray. A happy New Year to you!"

She did not know him. As she looked at the coarse red features, the crisp reddish hair, the powerful, square-set figure of a man of about forty, who would have seemed taller but for his bulk, she thought he could be no other than Andrew Morton, the new laird of Silence Farm.

'Silence Farm

"Are you Mr. Morton?"

"Ay, my lass ; I'm Andrew Morton, an' no other."

"You are welcome, Mr. Morton. Will ye step in an' see Mr. Ruthven?"

"Surely : that's what I'm here for. Just hold my horse, Margaret, my lass."

The girl flushed at the familiarity. A hard look came into her eyes.

"My name is Gray, Mr. Morton : Miss Gray, at your service."

"Hoity-toity ! we're mighty folk, we are ! When you come to service at Silence Farm you'll ha' to put up wi' Margaret—forbye the chance o' Madge, Maggie, Peggy, Meggan, or Meg !"

"I have no intention of returning to Silence Farm."

Mr. Morton looked curiously at her. She did not seem or speak like a farm-girl.

"Have ye heard—has Mr. Ruthven heard —about his son's having gone off wi' Martin Comyn's daughter ?"

"Yes, Mr. Ruthven has heard that."

"They're married, ye know."

"We know that, too."

"An' has Mr. Ruthven heard that Lord

Silence Farm

Kinrye won't now give the second stewardship to James Ruthven?"

"He has not heard that. But he does not expect now that Lord Kinrye will fulfil his promise."

"Promise . . . there's no question o' promise wi' a wastrel like that."

"If that's all you've to say, Mr. Morton, I think there's no use in disturbing Mr. Ruthven. He's not very well. And if you will let me add, I don't see that there's any call for you, a stranger, to decry James Ruthven here."

"Eh . . . what . . . ah! ha, ha, ha, to be sure! an old flame, eh? Still sweet on him, my lass! Fie! for shame! for shame! An' he a new-married man, too, though hardly a respectable one, I fear! Tuts, girl, do not bridle like a turkey-cock. I'm only joking."

Margaret looked at him out of her steadfast eyes. When she spoke it was quietly and in a firm voice:

"There are some jokes that are insults. I'll trouble you, Mr. Morton, to say what you have to say, and then to leave me alone. The subject does not interest me."

"Oh, I'm not for forcing myself upon you,

Silence Farm

Miss . . . Miss Gray ! But it's a little taking-aback to find a dairy-lass an' farm-girl with the speech an' manners of a town-lady ! Take my word for't, my girl, you're making a mistake. You've got to work for your living now, an' the sooner you go back to guid Scots and the farm ways, the easier it'll be for you."

"Have you ridden up here on the New Year to tell me this ?"

"No, of course not, not just for that ; only it was your daft . . . Ah, here's Mr. Ruthven. Good-day to ye, Mr. Ruthven, an' a happy New Year!"

"I think I can more hopefully wish *you* a happy New Year, Mr. Morton, than you can me. But will you come in ?"

"No, thank ye all the same. But now you're here, I won't dismount. I rode up to Moss Dykes just to wish you well. An' see here, Mr. Ruthven : I won't pretend I don't know all about your new trouble. If your son's folly leaves you with nothing in the world—an' I hear that he raised money on Heatherton farm-stock an' that you're accountable—I just wish to say that I'm willing to do as my uncle suggested, and give Margaret

Silence Farm

Gray here a good berth at Silence Farm.
She could come over often and see you.
It's a fair offer."

"And I have already answered it, Uncle Archibald," Margaret interrupted. "Mr. Morton," she added, "Mr. Ruthven is not well. He cannot be left alone. My place is here. There is no more to be said."

"All right, my lass. You're a dour jade, but you mean well. I bear no malice, an' if you change your mind, Miss Gray . . . eh, what's that?"

"It will be Margaret then, Mr. Morton."

He looked at her gravely-smiling eyes, and laughed genially.

"Well, well, we needn't split a straw. But now good-day to ye, Mr. Ruthven, an' think over what I've said."

"I will ask you one thing, Mr. Morton. As soon as you have heard what my son disposed of, will you let me know? I had thought everything was settled up, but since it is not, I will not rest content until every debt is met, though it costs me to the last farthing of the trifle I have left."

"Yes, I'll do that. Good-day again, sir. An' to you too, Margaret—I mean, Miss Gray!"

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It was a dreary afternoon. Hour after hour Archibald Ruthven sat silent and motionless before the fire, staring dully into the red coals. Margaret went to and fro, unpacking, and cleaning, and setting in order, but with a face white and set, and in her eyes a pain as deep as it was incommutable. She had read Martin Comyn's letter and that of Kirsten Ruthven.

She went about as one inwardly frozen. Sometimes she looked at the old man by the fire. What would happen, she wondered, if the little money he had over from the sale of Silence Farm would all go in the new liability incurred by James Ruthven? They could not, he useless now, make even a labourer's living out of Moss Dykes. She would have to go to Silence Farm . . . or —well, there was nothing for it but parish relief.

"God grant he may die first," she muttered.

Between three and four the rainy gloom deepened into night. It had become much colder. The wind rose steadily, moaning or wailing with long mournful howls and sudden screeches. The smell of snow was in the air. She lit the lamp, and then prepared

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their scanty supper. When it was ready, Mr. Ruthven sat down to it without a word. They had the meal in silence.

When it was over, he lit his pipe and took his seat before the fire again. He waited till she had cleared away the supper things.

“ Margaret.”

“ Yes, uncle?”

“ What do ye think o’ Mr. Morton’s offer?”

“ It’s for you to say, not for me.”

“ I’ve had a dull, weary day myself, Margaret—but not so dull but that I’ve seen you’ve had a worse. What is it, my girl? You look as though your heart was broke.”

“ Do I, Uncle Archibald dear? Then that is very foolish of me. I am only sair tired. An’ I’m sorry, oh so sorry! for you, uncle, in all this suffering. It was bad enough, but I trusted that we’d begin the New Year with better hope.”

“ I do not want ye to leave me, lass. Not yet awhile, any way.”

“ I won’t leave you, dear.”

“ Kiss me, my girl. God knows you’re my comfort—ay, an’ in more than ye know—more than ye know.”

After that a silence fell upon both again.

Silence Farm

Each sat staring into the red flame. At last the old man's head began to nod drowsily.

"You must go to bed, uncle dear. It's early, but you're tired out. You'll be all the better for it to-morrow."

"Yes. Get me the Book. I maun read a bit first."

Margaret rose and handed him the Bible. But his eyes were too dim whenever he looked at the printed page.

"I canna read it. Open it anywhere, Margaret, an' read from where your eyes first light on."

She put the book on the table and opened it idly, thinking of what else was moving in her mind.

The page was open at the First Book of Samuel. She began from the first words that caught her eyes :

"What have I done? What is mine iniquity? And what is my sin before Thy..."

"Do not read there," cried Mr. Ruthven, with an abrupt vehemence that startled Margaret; "turn over—elsewhere, elsewhere."

She rapidly turned a dozen pages or so, and again began :

"Should Abner die as a fool dieth? Thy

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hands were not bound, nor thy feet put into fetters ; as a man falleth before the children of iniquity, so didst thou fall. And all the people wept again over him."

"Read no more in Samuel, Margaret. I am weary of much reading in that book."

She turned the pages listlessly, and began once more, reading from Ecclesiastes :

"I have seen all the works that are done under the sun, and behold all is vanity, and a striving after wind. That which is crooked cannot be made straight."

Slowly, in a monotonous voice, while the moorland wind moaned and wailed, and the scurrying snow drove against the door and windows, she read onward through that supreme utterance of the human heart, the supreme word of mortal wisdom and despair, the eternal negative for ever gnawing at the roots of every promise and hope in the Book of Revelation.

But when she had read as far as "*the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead,*" Archibald Ruthven groaned, and put his hands to his face, and bowed his head.

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"Read no more! read no more!" he muttered.

Yet before she put away the Book he lifted his head, and through streaming eyes asked her to read the last words that were in the mouth of the prophet.

"*For God,*" she read slowly,* and with difficulty, for the tears were in her eyes— "*For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.*"

Mr. Ruthven rose, and kissed Margaret on the brow.

"Good-night," he said quietly.

As slowly he left the room she heard him muttering, "*For God shall bring every hidden thing into judgment.*"

For many minutes after he left, Margaret sat before the fire, thinking. The wailing of the wind had become more and more incessant, and the shovelling sound of the driven snow told of the storm which raged upon the moors.

"Winter is come at last," she muttered; "I wonder how the old man will stand it. What are we to do, if all the little he has must go to meet the fresh debt? It's easy for him and me to say that I can take service

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at Silence Farm, but what would the old man do here by himself? He has become that helpless, poor Uncle Archibald! and in this cold, bitter winter in this lonely, bleak place he would soon die if left to himself."

For long she sat turning over these and kindred thoughts in her mind. A wearisome restlessness possessed her. She felt as though she would never sleep again. Was it snowing so hard, was the wind so wild and mournful, away south there in Carlisle? What was Kirsten Comyn, Kirsten Ruthven, doing? Was she lying in James Ruthven's arms, looking up into his smiling face, listening to his lover-words?

Margaret rose, and went to the little square window. Staring till the sheen of the firelight had been overcome, she saw at last only a shroud-white mass of snow wedged halfway across the pane, and beyond only a coal-black void of darkness. Her left hand was at her breast. Slow tears fell from her eyes.

"Oh, James, James!" she muttered; "and I loved you so! I loved you so! And he . . . what is *he* doing? Is he whispering to her the same words as he was

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fond o' whispering to me? She's far bonnier than me, of course, but he couldn't say more to her than he said to me. Is she bonnie? I wonder. In his letters he did not seem to think much of her. When I asked Adam Sémple some time back what like she was, he said she was like Janet Douglas—plump and fair, with empty blue eyes and little dolly hands."

Margaret looked down at her hands. They were not white and small. And yet . . .

Did James remember that August night in the byres when the thunderstorm came on, the night Whiteleaf was to calve but died? did he remember what he said then? did he remember what later he had whispered beneath her falling hair, when he had climbed to her window?—Love himself come out of the darkness, as it had seemed often to her since in waking dreams.

He had spoken lightly to her of other girls, of Liz Drummond, of Kirsten, of others; perhaps he spoke thus lightly, contemptuously, of her, Margaret, to that blue-eyed, dolly-handed woman.

At the thought she flushed. Suddenly she remembered something.

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Going to the small cupboard room which had to serve her as bedroom, she opened her box. On the narrow shelf at one side were her few treasures. From these she took the turquoise ring James had sent to her in Edinburgh with his first letter. When she was in the kitchen again, she leaned her arms against the mantelpiece, and stared into the fire, the ring clasped in the hollow of her right hand.

That would be the best place for it, she thought—there, among the dying coals, the gray ashes. It was all over now, that dream she had dreamed—ominously over. The proud heart of the girl rose in revolt against the wrong done to it, to her. Were all men like this? Was love, man's love, only an eagerness to enjoy a fruit more or less difficult to get—a fruit they might break their necks trying to get, but that was no better than any other fruit, and, when got, was as often as not thrown away for a neighbour on the same branch, or perhaps taken home as a treasure and then left slowly to rot?

The firelight flickered upon her gray dress, upon her white face, dancing in and out

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among the warm shadows. Suddenly a single tongue of bright yellow flame shot up. It was like the light of day, of the knowledge of all the folk at Silence Farm, of the sneering looks of every man and woman between Muirton and Drayboro', of the eyes of the world.

With a swift impatient gesture, while the blood swung to her face, Margaret drew back. Lifting her hand, she poised it a moment, then flung the ring into the red hollow of the fire.

"Lie there till the morn, dead love," she said scornfully, "an' i' the morn I'll look at ye again and see how ye seem to me then."

A difference in the sound without caught her quick ear. The snow had ceased, and now either sleet or a slanting rain drove out of the night.

Margaret went to the door. Opening it, she closed it at once behind her, as the wet blast rushed into the room. In a few moments she was drenched with the sleety rain. At first she could neither see nor hear. The howl and rush of the wind, the soaking whirl of the tempest, the drowning blackness, overwhelmed her.

Silence Farih

She gave a gasp of physical relief when the rain drenched through to the skin. It was like a cool hand upon her breast. She felt her hair matting with the damp, but the flame in her head cooled.

It was not till she shivered with chill that she stirred. Then, with a weary gesture, she turned, muttering something about the ‘coo,’ in the coarse farmyard Lallan tongue.

“It’s a’ I’m fit for,” she added. “Andrew Morton was right. I’m only a farm-lass, an’ I’d best make up my mind to’t. Aweel, Madge Gray, ye’ve had your dream, an’ now, my lass, ye maun buckle to an’ no let Aggie Saunders or Bessie Whyte gie ye the go-by. Miss Margaret Gray I’ll be still to the old man—it’s all he’ll have left of what he’s lost—but to mysel’ an’ a’ else I’m only Madge or Maggie or Meggan or Peggy, or whatever they like. Oh, Jim, Jim ! . . . no, I’ll never think o’ you again, you . . . *coward!*”

With stumbling feet she made her way to the byre. The sow grunted heavily as she passed the ready-made sty at the angle of the ramshackle building. A hot, fetid smell filled the byre, which was warm and close despite the draughts which whistled through

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the chinks, and the monotonous moaning hiss of the wind-eddies among the torn rafters and loose thatch. When the sow rose, snorting and grunting, her litter scurried round her, squealing. Their trampling hoofs set free more odours of garbage and filth. Margaret stood by the sty for a minute.

"She's in his arms the now," she muttered, "warm and sweet."

The stench sickened her. She felt herself grow whiter in the darkness. Turning to a ledge on the wall, she fumbled for a lantern, lit the tallow dip within it, and, holding it above her head, stared about her.

The black sow leered up at her with bloodshot little eyes, the slobbering snout wrinkled at the fangs as though she were ready to fasten these in this nocturnal intruder. There was a broom-handle lying against the sty. Margaret took it and hit the grunting brute on the flank.

"Lie quiet," she said with sullen anger, "or they'll hear ye, the two lovers. D'ye think she can hear him whisper *Kirsten, Kirsten, Kirsten*, wi' you gruntin' awa' like that, you an' your dirty litter, ye hideous black brute?"

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The cow began a broken lowing, stamping her hoofs, and restlessly switching a long, unkempt, dung-matted tail. Margaret slowly walked to her side.

"What is't, Prutchie? What's wrang wi' ye?"

The cow swung round her head again and again, the startled velvety eyes staring wildly at the white-faced girl with the lantern.

She put her right hand on the beast and quieted her. The coarse brown hair was damp with sweat. Margaret withdrew her hand angrily, and wiped it on some straw.

"D'ye hear the 'win', Prutchie? It's blawin' hard frae here to yer ain countree. Ye're a Cumberland coo, ye ken. D'ye ken Carlisle, Prutchie? Ma certy, lass, but it's a braw toon. What's the auld song :

*"It's weel, weel wi' ye noo,
Bonnie Lord James, sae douce an' braw ;
But when the coo calfs,
An' the wean laughs,
The win' sall blaw, sall blaw, sall blaw,
The win' sall blaw by Carlisle-wa' !
Bonnie Lord James, sae douce an' braw,
The win' sall blaw
By Carlisle-wa' !"*

The silent passion working in the girl's face suddenly faded. Her eyes glazed, the

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lantern fell with a crash at her feet. She swayed, and swung headlong.

The cow snorted and tugged at her rope. The straw had already caught fire, but it and the lantern were soon trampled by the frightened beast. The girl's dress was trampled too, and soiled where she lay.

Burst after burst of sleet harried the shaking door and the small square lozenge-paned window. The wind rose to a tempestuous force; rose in violence, as from height to height.

Chapter XII

THE first week dragged slowly by at Moss Dykes. None came near except old Mrs. Strang, and she only because Margaret was down with a heavy feverish cold. The girl was too ill to do anything about the house, but on the sixth day she was able to be up and about again.

She had aged, a little coarsened. Even Mr. Ruthven saw that.

"She feels the change even more than I do, an' no wonder, poor lass!" he muttered often to himself.

Towards the end of the second week Andrew Morton called again. It was to let Mr. Ruthven know that the debt due for the farm-stock at Heatherton, wrongfully disposed of by his son, was over two hundred pounds.

The old man was in his bed asleep when the new laird of Silence Farm called. Margaret met him at the door and took the

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message. She knew that the whole of the pittance left to Archibald Ruthven out of the wreck of his fortune would not cover that sum ; but when Andrew Morton looked at her with admiring, covetous eyes, and again pressed her to come to Silence Farm, she answered only :

" There is no need, Mr. Morton. The debt will be paid. I'm quite content here."

She was glad Mr. Ruthven had not heard. The old man was ailing. The shock would bring him lower. Already he had almost forgotten what a heavy trouble might come to him from Heatherton. Besides, she wished to think over every possible chance. Perhaps Lord Kinrye might help. Perhaps James himself might at least relinquish what he had so wrongfully got, when he heard that his father was now a pauper.

She was glad indeed that she had said nothing, when, in the afternoon of the next day, and while she was dreading the inevitable breaking of the news, little Willie Baird brought a letter that had reached Wardlaw Post-office that day after the post-man had left on his long morning round.

It was from Edinburgh, and had an

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official stamp and seal. Could it be a summons or writ, or some fresh blow in legal guise? She trembled while Mr. Ruthven read it, but when he said, "Thank God for that!" and handed her the letter, she, too, thanked God from her heart.

Brief as they were, the contents brought immediate relief. Israel Smith, the defaulting lawyer and accountant, had been arrested in New York. He had already lost a great part of the fortune he had absconded with in fresh and wild speculations in Wall Street, but something had been saved. The man himself had died on the homeward passage. The share that would be at once returned to Archibald Ruthven would be about three hundred and thirty pounds.

Before he could get this relative good fortune too deeply fixed in his mind, Margaret broke to him the ill-tidings from Heatherton. It was a bitter disappointment to find in how much he was involved, and below his breath he uttered the pain and hurt of a sore heart against his selfish son; but, proud man as he was, it was with infinite relief that he realized he could now discharge this last and worst of all his debts, and yet have at least a hundred

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pounds to the good. Small as the residue was, it stood between him and the parish. He could buy some stock with part of it. He and Margaret would make it go far. With eggs and milk and butter and meal and their own potatoes they would do well enough, and things would improve.

Week after week went by, and nothing changed at Moss Dykes. The winter was a long and hard one, and Archibald Ruthven grew weaker by slow, almost imperceptible degrees. Day by day life was the same for him and for Margaret.

He went out less and less, except on the rare days when it was sunny. Only once did Margaret leave Moss Dykes, and that was to go to Muirton in the carrier's cart, and purchase fowls and meal, and garden and farm seed. On the way she learned from Adam Semple what everyone else along the countryside knew, that James Ruthven and his wife were now in America. Ruthven had got some work out there, Semple understood. He thought it was a clerkship in a grain-store at a place called Camden, near Philadelphia.

With the first breath of spring Margaret .

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looked eagerly to see the old man regain something of his former vigour. For a week or two in February he was cheerful, and spoke of what he was soon going to do. Once he went with Adam Semple to Candlemas Fair at Muirton ; but he came back so much sadder, as well as so dead-weary, that Margaret was conscious of a despondency about him deeper than any she had yet known.

He had brought her a prettily - marked black-and-tan collie bitch called Fan, which had been promised him by an old neighbour who had bought his prize collie Swiftsure from him. The gift gave her pleasure, but she sighed as she saw how often the old man confused Fan and Swiftsure, and she wondered if at times he did not think he was back at Silence Farm.

Before the end of the month a sudden attack of a paralytic nature prostrated him. When a few days later he moved about again, she saw that the end could not be long delayed ; a year or two at most, she feared, perhaps far less. That he knew it, too, was evident, for he dictated to her (being no longer able to write) a letter of urgent

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entreaty to James, begging him to come back. For some reason Archibald Ruthven wished to see his son before he died. That Margaret realized.

"You could write, you know, uncle," she urged, though knowing well that James would pay no attention to his father's plea.

"No," he answered; "I could not write what I want to say to my son."

March came and went, a wet and dreary month. April followed, damp and chill. The gray bleakness of that dreary moorland region was never more bleak or drear. The continual sunlessness depressed Margaret, and slowly but surely wore the life out of the old man.

When the Spring Fast came round, Archibald Ruthven took to his bed. Daily he began to ask for James. No word came from his son, no letter.

When at last one came, it was not to Mr. Ruthven, but to Margaret.

"What did it mean?" she wondered, as she sat before the fire, watching the meal boil for their noon dinner. She did not open the letter till Mr. Ruthven had eaten his porridge and milk, and had dozed off again.

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Slowly she opened it, but when the first words caught her startled eyes she put it down on her lap, and looked idly at the fire, blanched, with bloodless lips, a strange trembling all through her.

The words were, "My own darling Madge."

Nothing so wildly improbable had been in her mind. The words swung her from her balance. It was long before she could even think coherently.

Her instinct then was to throw the letter in the fire unread. What could it be but a crying in her heart? What right had he, save the shameful right of balked and reawakened desire, to write to her so?

At last with an effort she mastered the tumult of emotion which distracted her. Slowly, word by word, and sometimes letting them form upon her lips, till, unconsciously, she read them in a muttering whisper, she went through James Ruthven's letter :

"MY OWN DARLING MADGE,

"I don't know whether you'll be surprised to see me writing from here. We came here from New York; for when we

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got there, and I could find nothing to do, and one day I met Andy Melville, and he offered me a place in a grain-store further west, I just jumped at it. This town, Camden, is near Philadelphia. It's a dirty, mean little town, and I'm sick of it I'm sick of it, and the States, and of things in general; and I'm most of all sick of my wife, and that's why I begin this letter to you as I do. Oh, Madge, my own dear lass! I've made the most awful fool of myself. Never did a man make a greater mistake than I did when I married that nincompoop, Kirsten Comyn. I wish to God she was Kirsten Comyn still! But it was all out of love for you, Margaret. I had no other love but you. Only when I heard of the smash-up, and knew that the old man would be more set than ever against our marriage, I got desperate, and in a moment of weakness I agreed to marry Kirsten Comyn. She told me she was well off, and I thought I would be able to help father and you. But she wasn't, curse her! Oh, Madge, my girl, you can't know how I've longed for you! I thought it was all over with us, and I was glad to get to the States; but I wasn't long.

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there before I discovered two things : that I was more in love with you than ever, and that I had come to hate that woman—that woman who's my wife, worse luck !

" We love each other, Madge. I can't believe you don't love me still. I know there's no other woman in the world for me. And you're not a silly fool like most women —you're not the kind to chuck away all your chances of happiness just because you and I have both made a mistake : you, in not having me when you could have had me ; and I, in marrying that woman in a pique.

" Madge, my darling lass, don't let's ruin our lives. Come to me, my girl, and I'll make you the happiest woman in the world, as you'll make me the happiest man in the world. The woman will get a divorce the moment you're once here, for she's as jealous as they're made. She hates the very name of you, Madge. I'm always thinking, ay, always speaking of you.

" I've done well out here. The first money I had to spare I put in a big concern—a 'deal' they call it—and I made money out of it. This is the third time I've had a good haul.

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"Now, here's my plan. Let you and me get married, and then we'll either buy an orange-farm down Florida way, or go out west to a ranche in California. We'll do well, and be rich and happy. It's better than Moss Dykes, Madge, ay—or than Silence Farm and the whole countryside from Drayboro' to Muirton! You know what has been between us. I know your real loving heart. Will you come? Will you come, Madge?

"Of course I don't ask you to come right away. Your duty is by the old dying man. I'm sore sorry to hear he's so low. It's the law o' the world, though; as old Peter Strang used to say, 'When ye're doon wi' the back-rheumatics it's a sign the sexton's clearin' his throat for an early job.' Anyhow, I can't come, of course; it's out of the question—*except for one thing.*

"Madge, if you'll let me come for *you*—if you prefer that to your coming over to me here—I'll come at once. I'll come by the first boat there is after I get your telegram, '*Come.*' Yes, that's a good arrangement. It will save you writing, too. As soon as I get that telegram, '*Come,*' I will cross the sea for you, my lass; or I'll tell you what,

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if the old man is really in a dying state, and you can't get away for some time, then telegraph just the word '*Later.*' I'll understand. In that case I'll see about getting a divorce at once. It's easy to manage that in this country.

"As I say, I have enough for us to start life with out west, or anywhere else, and to start it well. I know you will come for love's sake ; but away from love, my girl, ye must see ye'll never have such a chance again. And as for me, I'll be happy in having for my wife the handsomest and sweetest lass that ever came out o' old Scotland.

"You would like this country. An' I may tell you you'll get your fill o' books, if books you want. Are you as fond of reading as ever, Madge? Do you mind that night after I gave you the poetry-book, '*Evangeline*'? If it weren't that I hope soon to see you here, I would say there's no place like home. Well, soon I'll be hearing from you, and I think I know what answer my bonnie Margaret will send.

"Your loving
"JAMES."

When she had finished reading this letter,

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Margaret rose and crossed the room. From a desk she took a misshapen object. It was the remnant of a ring ; a twisted coil, from which the gold had all but melted, and where one or two oily black stones still adhered.

"This was the turquoise ring that was to bind us to each other for ever," she muttered, "and now it's as ugly and useless as a dead adder. But it's not so ugly and useless as the love that man has to offer me. He's bad and selfish to the core. Trust him! I wouldn't trust him any more than I'd trust a match near a flame. No, no, no! when the chick will go back to the egg, or the apple to the blossom, then will James Ruthven be true."

Once more she read the letter through, recognising in every line the false heart and false mind and false intent of the man who wrote it—sick at heart, too, because of the selfishness of it towards the poor old man now dying in the adjoining room.

At the thought of him she went to the bedside. She had not seen him asleep for some time past, and she was startled. Death seemed to be lying on the counterpane, with his head on the pillow beside that of Archi-

Silence Farm

bald Ruthven ; or else whence came that dusky shadow into the waxen face, that ashy hue into the thin, worn hands, which moved restlessly at times, and seemed to be idly plucking at invisible things—blossoms that did not bloom, flies that did not fly, grass that grew nowhere save in the shadow of the silent side of the grave.

Was death nearer than she thought ? she wondered. There was no time to be lost. Remembering that the boy Willie was still about the house, for she had given him a temporary “ ploy ” as herd-laddie, she sought him, and sent him off in haste to Wardlaw to fetch Dr. McClintonck.

When she returned to the bedside, Archibald Ruthven was sitting up against the pillows, his face grown hollow and ashen, but his eyes large, staring, luminous.

“ What is’t, uncle ? ” she asked anxiously.

“ I am dying, Margaret Gray.”

“ Oh, no, no, dear ! you’re only weak. You’ll soon be all right again. See, there’s Fan waving her tail with gladness to see you sitting up. You’ll soon be up and about as strong as ever, and stronger for the long rest you’ve had.”

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"I am dying."

"I have sent Willie Baird for the doctor, dear. He'll give you a medicine that will soon make you well. It's Dr. McClintock I've sent for."

"I am dying, girl."

Margaret stood bewildered, uncertain.

"Where's James?"

"I don't know. He's . . ."

"James! James!"

The old man called as though he thought his son would hear, as though he were in the next room, as though he were ready and waiting and eager to be called.

"James! James! James!"

"He's not here, Mr. Ruthven. He's not here, uncle. James is in America."

"In America? In America?" repeated the old man blankly. Then, later, in a curious tone, with a look of cunning in the half-closed eyes, he added : "In America, is he? Ah yes, to be sure—I remember. He's safe there. Safe—safe—safe. Margaret Gray, is there any place in the world where a man's safe—safely hid away from a designing wench? Eh? Answer me that, girl!"

Terrified by his vehemence, his words, the

Silence Farm

light as of madness in his eyes, she stood trembling.

Fan began to whimper. When she caught the old man's fierce gaze fixed upon her, she crouched and sidled behind Margaret, her tail stuck close between her hind-legs.

"Mr. Ruthven . . . Uncle Archibald!"

"What is it, girl? What d'ye want? There's no nonsense here, is there? No tomfoolery going on with letters? What was that letter ye got to-day?"

"None," answered the girl confusedly, half forgetting, half eager to prevent the old man asking her anything about James.

"None? Ye lie!"

There was silence. The girl stood white and trembling. The sweat broke in great drops on the face of Archibald Ruthven.

"I ken fine what *that* is," he said grimly, as he drew his hand across his brow. "That's the cauld sweat o' death."

Then suddenly, with the terrible clairvoyance of the dying, he shook at Margaret an outstretched palsied hand with pointed finger, while with flaming eyes he stared now at her breast, now at her face, and cried:

"What have ye there? What have ye

Silence Farm

there? It's a letter—it's a letter frae James! Oot wi't, lass! D'ye hear me, Marget? Ye've a letter there; I see't in your breast. It is from James, girl—it is from James!"

His voice had risen to a scream. Carried away by his own vehemence and choking emotion, he sat as though paralyzed—voiceless, but with his eyes still terrible in their luminous intensity.

"Yes," Margaret said quietly, "it is from James."

He sank back on the pillows, half exhausted, half pacified.

"Tell me," he whispered hoarsely: "tell me what he says."

"He says he can't come: he can't leave his work."

"Is he ill, that he doesn't come?—is he ill?"

"Yes, he is ill."

Something in her tone made Archibald Ruthven stare at her again with the terrible, fixed, luminous, unwinking stare of those who are soon to see no more.

"What is ill with the fool?" he demanded angrily. "He's made a mess o' things somehow, I'll be bound."

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"Yes, he's made a mess o' things."

The girl spoke mechanically. Mechanically she put her hand to her breast. She took out the letter, and slowly began to tear it up. The envelope was of tough fibre, and simply twisted.

With a sudden access of strength Mr. Ruthven sat up, leaned, and with a clawlike hand snatched the letter from her grasp.

"Ha! I can see for myself now."

"You can read it if you wish, Mr. Ruthven. It would be better not. It is no use. But you can read it if you wish. It will let you see what kind of man you have for son. Read it, an' think no more o' James. Think of yourself an' me, an' get well."

"He's made a mess o' things, has he?" muttered the old man. "Better that, though, than his coming over here. Better that, by God! Let's see . . . what . . . what's this . . ."

His face, which had grown flushed with excitement, became deathly white again, with an ashy grayness that terrified Margaret.

He turned and looked at her.

"Ye wanton bitch!"

Margaret shrank as though she had been

Silence Farm

struck a blow in the face. She grew paler, then flushed a purple-red, then grew whiter than before.

"It's a lie!" she cried, with quivering lips.

"A lie? And wi' this from a married man, wi' his wife beside him, '*My own darling Madge*'? Well, I've something to say to ye, Margaret Gray, when I've done with this tantarole."

With trembling hands the old man held the letter before him, but in the darkening light, and in the deeper darkness that was fast coming upon him, he could not read more than half of it.

The collie abruptly began to howl with a dreadful mournfulness.

Margaret turned and looked at the dog as though fascinated by some new horror.

"Damn the beast!" cried Mr. Ruthven savagely. "Turn her out—turn her out! Here, girl, bring me a light. Light the candle yonder. Quick, quick!"

With trembling haste she did as he asked, then held the candle close to him. The light flickered with her shaking hand.

In his own hands the letter shook with

Silence Farm

the palsy. Line by line he made out his son's writing, at times muttering the words.

Margaret's heart sank, or rose to her throat, choking her. But she had nothing to say. It was all a wretched lie, a wretched end. The old man would die : he would die cursing her. James was a liar and coward. It was all over ; it was all to fall upon her.

He had just reached the words, "I think I know what answer my bonnie Margaret will send," when the paper fluttered to the counterpane.

At the same moment some hot tallow from the candle dripped on to his right hand. He did not feel it.

Both he and Margaret had been startled by the same sound, a furtive knocking at the door.

Margaret looked round, half frightened, half eager. Archibald Ruthven, with fallen jaw, stared with wild eyes.

"Who is that? . . . Keep it away—keep it away!" he cried hoarsely, the sweat running down his furrowed face.

"It must be the doctor," she whispered.

Again a strange, irregular, furtive knocking, suddenly, startlingly loud.

The old man half rose, turned his head

Silence Farm

stiffly and slowly, and stared at a shadow on the wall beside him.

"*What's that?*" he whispered, his face blanched with horror.

"Nothing . . . nothing," Margaret cried; "it's only my shadow. See, it moves when I move."

At that moment the howling of the dog and an intermittent snuffling sound convinced her that the knocking was only from the collie's tail. The poor beast was desolate without, and vaguely knew that something dreadful or pitiful was happening, and, panting to get in, had kept her tail going against the door in eager protest.

"It's only Fan," Margaret whispered; "it's only the collie."

Mr. Ruthven sat rigid, staring at her.

"You've read the letter, sir?"

Slowly he stretched a gaunt arm, with tremulous, pointed finger. She could see that he strove to speak. No words came.

Suddenly, with a convulsive quiver, words literally burst from his throat:

"Coming for you! coming for you!" Then, with a long, rising, screaming cry: "*My God, girl! you are my daughter!*"

Silence Faron

With that his face changed. He laughed mirthlessly for a moment. Then he fell slowly back. His face slid on the smooth pillow.

A little foam appeared on his lower lip. Archibald Ruthven was dead.

Chapter XIII

FOR many minutes after Archibald Ruthven's death Margaret looked at the white, still face, ironical in its smiling, inscrutable silence. So this stern, morose man, whom in a way she loved, and to whom she owed everything, was her father. She was, she supposed with a faint flush, an illegitimate child. He had taken her as his charge. It was easy to say that she was his ward, his niece, anything.

She stooped, and stared into the half-closed eyes. It was not easy to forgive the man, even thus.

"Father and son," she muttered—"father and son; between them they have broken my life."

"How could you? How could you?" she cried later, with clasped hands, and tears streaming down her white drawn face; "oh, father, father, how could you!"

How base, how cowardly, it seemed! And

Silence Farm

all these years he had lived, knowing and perpetuating so bitter a wrong! These last three years in particular . . . why had he not absolutely prevented her and James from meeting? Why had he not sent her away? Why had he not told her or James? What madness it was to dream that he dwelled in safety because he feared the disclosure of the past!

Ah, how he had suffered! She remembered that. Now, with a full and terrible understanding, she realized his words that day when they walked under the Larches—that day of acute suffering for them both which had followed the night when James, her lover, had come to her window in the silence of the mid-dark.

With a shudder she thrust her hand across her mouth. What had she done, what said, in the byres, that thundery August gloaming? What words, what kisses, had left, had crossed her lips out of that window on that unforgettable night!

Unforgettable! “Aye,” she muttered, clenching her hands, “unforgettable.”

Suddenly she leaned above the dead man.

“It was *your* fault—not his, not mine,”

Silence Farm

she cried, lifting the corpse in her savage grip. "Old man, can ye hear me? How far away are you? Can ye hear? Can ye hear? Ah, perhaps you've met *her* now, the woman you wronged, the mother of Margaret Gray : *your* wanton, old man—you who a little ago put the shameful word on me! What is she saying to you? Is God listening? Ah, He's a man, too ; He won't hear *her*, He won't hear *me*: we are women."

She released her grip ; the body fell back. A horrible sound, half sob, half windy moan, came from it. With a start of horror she sprang back. Was he alive still? or was this an answer from the grave?

But in a few seconds she understood. The body lay still and rigid. When she had relinquished her hold, the air, still retained in the lungs and the throat, had been suddenly expelled.

For a time, however, she was completely unnerved. Unable to look longer on what had been Archibald Ruthven, she turned to leave, to go outside, for a brief while. Then, remembering what she had often heard should be done, she closed the eyelids and placed a penny over each, so that the

Silence Farm

eyes which could see no more should no more be open.

For an hour she sat on the rude bench outside the cottage. She watched the sow routing about in the kailyard, with her black or black-and-pink progeny, now well grown, running here and there, snorting and snuffling. She counted the fowls. There were three Brunswickers, seven Dorkings, five Cochin Chinas. Her eyes wandered to the ducks. There were four. Where could the other five be? For a time she wondered. Then she thought of the two pigeons that had settled in the byre-loft. One of them was snatching seed almost beneath the bill of an obese and affronted Cochin China. What a noise that drake made, squatting in the roadside shallow, and quacking with inane self-satisfaction. Where was Fan? Ah, there she was, harrying the gander and two geese, who were hissing with impotent fury and some fear.

These things alone occupied her. She had no thought for anything else. Her mind seemed a blank, except for what she could not see.

Tired, or idly indifferent at last, her gaze

Silence Farm

wandered farther. The spring day was bright with broken sunlight and hurrying cloud. Across the moorland great shadows swept. Idly she wondered if the travelling clouds sent their shadows speeding across the moors before them, or if they trailed them behind like shadowy plumes. What a wailing noise those plovers made—peaseweeps as they were called thereabout! Amid the yellow gorse near the farm-gate two stonechats had built their nest; she could see them flitting to and fro. Silly birds! The farm-cat, or first stray weasel, or rick-rat, or curious magpie, would soon find them out, and either the eggs would be sucked or the little birds eaten.

That was a yellow-hammer on the whin; she heard its sweet, plaintive "*a-little-more-bread-and-but-but-butter, ple-eese*" — how often she had laughed at the countryside rendering of the pretty love-note!—and wondered if his mate had her loving brown-black eyes on his gay yellow coat.

She envied the rooks sailing high under the drifting clouds, against whose white flanks they stood out inky black. What a needless fuss those flocks of starlings made! Was

Silence Farm

not that a raven yonder? What was it, now, a raven meant—a raven croaking on a broken bough? Ah yes, death.

Death! With a sudden shiver she remembered. The old man was dead—Mr. Ruthven, her father.

She rose and stared across the moor, shading her eyes with her hand.

No one was visible. Where could Willie Baird have lingered? Or was Dr. McClintock not to be found?

Impatiently she turned. Just then she caught sight of the cat taking the farm-dyke at a scrambling jump, while a stone hit the ridge an inch from its tail. It was Willie, then, back!

The boy had not found Dr. McClintock in. He had been called away to Renton Shaws, fifteen miles off. But he would ride over to Moss Dykes that evening, so Mrs. McClintock had promised.

With that, but not telling the boy what had happened, she sent him to old Mrs. Strang, her one friend.

The loneliness and strange terror were not so oppressive when once the old woman was come, and went almost wholly when the

Silence Farm

body had been "laid out," and all that could be done was done.

The long day passed somehow. For three or four hours Margaret slept profoundly. The gloaming had come when she woke.

While Mrs. Strang was getting the tea ready, and, in accordance with immemorial custom, frying a double rasher for the death-supper, Margaret examined the papers in the desk which Mr. Ruthven had brought with him from Silence Farm.

Most were vouchers, statements, bills, old farm-accounts. In another drawer were letters, some in James's handwriting, most of these when he was a youth and had first left home. In another drawer was a packet of about a dozen letters labelled "Private. To be destroyed unread. Letters of my wife."

Leaving the room, Margaret took these and thrust them in the fire beneath the hissing kettle.

In the next drawer she opened she found a cheque-book, a savings-bank book, a sealed envelope marked "My Will," a letter to herself, and a package of three letters, faded and worn, with old brown stamps.

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The will, she knew, would now be useless, but she replaced it unopened. The money in the bank would all go for that Heatherton debt. The trifle in the savings-bank would pay for the funeral and other death expenses. What was over would belong to James Ruthven. In any case she would not touch a farthing of it.

She opened the letter to herself. It was very short, and was dated from Silence Farm:

“MY DEAR MARGARET,

“You may never see this letter. If useless to leave it, I shall destroy it before my death. But if circumstances make this inadvisable, I shall leave it for you. With it is a package containing a statement of my own, with certain particulars, and three letters from your mother, Margaret Gray. After you have read these destroy them. I will say no more but this, *Forgive me.* I have done you a great wrong. Since then I have tried to do my best by you, tried to do what I thought right. God’s hand has been heavy on me. I have paid for my wrong. Once more, forgive me. You will see by my will that I have left you a third of

Silence Farm

all I die possessed of. I trust to you not to let others know of what you will learn within.

“Your father,

“ARCHIBALD RUTHVEN.”

Margaret was about to open the package, when Mrs. Strang called her to “come ben an’ have the eggs an’ bacon when they were hot.”

She ate in silence, or spoke only to answer the old woman with mechanical exactitude.

When the meal was done, she lit a candle and took the letters into the room where the dead man lay. His right arm lay along the coverlet. By a strange whim she put the candle-guard into his hand, so that he, her father, should hold the light whereby she should read what he had to say about the two women named Margaret Gray.

To her surprise, the document was not a long one. She read it over three times.

From it she learned the dead man’s story, the secret of his life.

When he was five-and-twenty he had met and loved Margaret Gray, the sister of his dearest friend, a minister at Inverglen, near Edinburgh. They loved each other from

Silence Farm

the first. One thing only stood between them, his ungovernable temper. There had been many painful scenes, though never directly between him and her after the first occasion; but they came to a climax one Sunday, when, after a heated argument on some point of honour, and an unthinkingly slighting remark on the part of Robert Gray, Archibald Ruthven had sprung upon him with savage violence and had nearly killed him.

After that he had been forbidden the house, and Margaret herself had refused to see him.

Wild with anger, and tortured with harassing doubts about Margaret, he had gone back to Edinburgh. There he had met again his friends the Crawfords, and had frankly been made love to by Jane Elizabeth Crawford, between whom and himself there had been "passages." In a fit of pique he asked her to marry him. To the last he was ready to break off the engagement at a hint from Margaret. On the day before the wedding he received a letter from her. It consisted simply of the words "I wish you well."

Silence Farm

For three years thereafter he had no word of the Grays. At the end of the first year James was born. By the end of the third year a loveless and unfortunate marriage had ended in a state of mutual bitterness and animosity. For this reason, and not, indeed, without some hope that absence would heal the wound in each, and even bring about a reconciliation with some possibility of happiness, he had accepted a temporary factorship of a large estate in New Zealand. That was the happiest year of his life. When the year was over he took a passage to Sydney, and would, indeed, have settled in Australia or New Zealand had he not had word that his wife was dying.

While in Sydney he met Margaret Gray. Her brother had died two years before of consumption, and she herself had been ordered to go on a voyage. She was now quite strong, and more beautiful than ever.

His old love for her rose in a flame. (Throughout Archibald Ruthven told his story without comment.) This flame became a consuming passion when he found that Margaret Gray returned his love, had, indeed, never wavered from her love for him.

Silence Farm

From the first he lied to her. His wife was dead, he said ("to myself I excused this lie, for from the letter I had received I thought it likely I should never see her again, that even then she was dead"), and he had come out to New Zealand. But now he was returning to Scotland and to Silence Farm.

After a week she promised to marry him. They were married in Sydney.[•] After a wonderful six weeks through the divine Tasmanian spring—for they had gone to Tasmania for the honeymoon—they set sail for the old country. The sailing-vessel took the long way by the Cape of Good Hope, and through stress of weather had to put in at Cape Town. There, as Margaret was seriously unwell, they stayed for nearly three months. In that time Archibald Ruthven heard twice from his wife. She had recovered, and was impatient and angered at his delay. His long absence was beginning to involve much confusion and more and more loss.

After a long voyage he and Margaret landed at Gravesend in the Thames, some seven and a half months from the date of their wedding.

• He meant to tell her in London. He did

Silence Farm

not : he could not. She had a married sister in York ; he wished her to stay there while he went on to prepare Silence Farm for her coming. But she would not leave him. The child she bore within her was ever on her mind. "Something might happen any day," she urged always. She had, too, a premonition of misfortune.

They went to Edinburgh. He never told her. And this was why : on the morning after their arrival, while her husband had gone to see his lawyer, Margaret was strolling along Princes Street, when she met Mr. Stuart, the minister of Inverglen, to whom her brother Robert had been assistant, and for a time *locum tenens*.

When he had accosted her as Miss Gray, but almost immediately corrected himself when he saw that she was soon to become a mother, she had told him that she was Mrs. Archibald Ruthven. When he asked if her husband was any relation of Mr. Ruthven of Ruthven, she answered that they were one and the same, and that he and she were now on the way to Silence Farm.

"Mrs. Archibald Ruthven—Jane Crawford that ~~was~~—is my cousin," he said gravely.

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She looked at him, startled. With kindly tact he assumed an abrupt rudeness, and managed to evade further questioning till they were back at her hotel again. There she told him the little she had to tell. He, in return, told her what he knew.

She never came out of the death-swoon into which she fell. Labour came upon her unconscious. When, with difficulty, the physician brought the child into the world, Margaret was within a few minutes of death.

None ever learned of what had happened except Mr. Stuart's brother-in-law, Martin Comyn. The minister had insisted upon a witness to Archibald Ruthven's pledge that he would bring up Margaret Gray's child "as though she were his own lawfully-begotten daughter."

Seven years after that Mrs. Ruthven had died. Some inkling of the truth had come to her, and when she died she left her curse upon her husband, whom she had come to hate with a bitter, inveterate hatred. When she had first wrung from him a terrible vow that he would never reveal the truth to their son James, she added: "I leave my curse with you, to be your friend by day and your

Silence Farm

wedded mate by night." These were her last words to him, uttered with bitter irony.

"From the day I brought you to Silence Farm" (concluded the statement, addressed to Margaret in the dead man's handwriting), "from the care of the good woman Mrs. Gray (whose real name was Munro, but who, to please me, agreed to take the name of Gray), with whom I had left you, you know the rest. But you can never know what I have suffered. You shall never know how my wife's curse has fulfilled itself. You shall never know the cancer of ruined love, such as my love for your mother has been and is. You shall never know the horror of my sin ; the horror of the meeting with *her* that must one day come ; the horror of what awful mischance might bring you and your brother James together as man and woman.

"And now you know all. Will you be the third woman to weigh me down to hell with the unspoken curse of a broken heart? Or, Margaret, will you forgive me? if not for my sake, then for hers whose name you bear ; whom I loved with all my heart and soul ; whom I love still with all my heart.

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and soul; who was a woman like yourself.
Child, will you forgive me?

“ARCHIBALD RUTHVEN.”

When Margaret had finished the third reading of this statement, she took the candlestick from the dead man's hand. Bending over him, she looked long into his face.

“Archibald Ruthven,” she said slowly at last, “if the woman whom you have met again—my mother—has forgiven you, I, too, can forgive you. Hear me, wherever you are: *I forgive you.*”

A rat scurried among the paper-covered rafters overhead. The dead man's watch ticked. There was no other sound.

“But,” added the girl, still more slowly, “I will not call you father, Archibald Ruthven, till we meet again.”

With that she put the paper to the flame of the candle.

* * * *

It was midsummer when Margaret made up her mind that she would accept Andrew Morton's offer of a situation at Silence Farm.

Silence Farm

Since the shock of Archibald Ruthven's death and the revelation of his secret—to her so terrible, so shameful—the girl had changed greatly. Voluntarily she appeared determined to put from her every sign of the past to which she belonged, and yet by some strange inconsistency she did not wish to leave the moorland region where she had spent so much of her life, where her woman's life had expanded and been destroyed. When Andrew Morton offered her a good post, she refused; when, later, he offered another, not so good, she refused again; but when at last, half angrily and contemptuously, half compassionately, he offered her a place as farm-girl, she told him she would accept it.

Even if she had come upon no evidence, she would never have doubted the truth of those terrible last words of Archibald Ruthven. In a flash all had become clear to her—the tragedy of this man's life; his terror and apparently insensate rage at the bare idea of any love between herself and James; his prayers and moody reveries; his eagerness that James should marry anyone if only he would marry some other than herself; his occasional obvious hatred of his son; his

Silence Farm

clinging to her ; his suspiciousness of late ; his horror, at the very gate of death, to find that, after all, his sin was perhaps to come back upon him and his with crushing force.

She understood it all now, or if she did not understand the spiritual madness which could perpetuate, could so long endure, a position so false and perilous, she saw all else, and how, from Archibald Ruthven's standpoint, he being the man he was, it was inevitable.

None should ever know of it. As to that she had no question. Not even James should learn the truth. For herself, she would die rather than tell him, the man who had loved her, the man whom she loved. But apart from herself, there was the dead, and the memory of the dead. All these years Archibald Ruthven had kept his secret. Probably not a living soul had any inkling of it, unless it were Martin Comyn, and doubtless he would now be silent. There had been enough scandal about his daughter, as it was. He would not want more talk about James Ruthven. But she must make sure.

Chapter XIV

MARGARET GRAY had told Andrew Morton that she would not leave Moss Dykes till Lammas, but before the midsummer quarter she changed her mind. The croft-farm was no longer hers, and Andrew Morton wanted it for his chief shepherd. Every farthing that remained after settlement of the Heatherton and all subsequent minor debts was to go to James Ruthven. She herself was now a pauper.

She had written to Martin Comyn. He had not answered her letter. She had written to Lord Kinrye. He had replied that he could not go against his nephew, and let her stay on at Moss Dykes, nor, he much regretted, could he give her any situation at Kinrye Chase. She would have gone out to service far away, but that she clung to the one thing left to her—her home, Silence Farm.

So she agreed to go to service with

Silence Farm

Andrew Morton as a farm-girl. To return to the house itself was what she could not agree to.

Immediately after Archibald Ruthven's funeral she wrote fully to James. It was only at the close of her letter that she alluded to his last letter to herself.

"I have nothing to say," she wrote, "to what you urge except this : that what you ask is impossible ; that I never wish to see you again ; and that I would die rather than again hear a word of love from you. Good-bye."

As for the neighbours, they were at once puzzled and somewhat scandalized when they read on the gravestone in the churchyard of the village of Kirk o' Ruthven, a few miles north of Drayboro', this inscription below the name of Archibald Ruthven : "It is enough : now stay Thine hand."

But Margaret was not to be persuaded otherwise, and as none had the right to interfere, she had her will. To the minister she explained that she had again and again heard Mr. Ruthven repeat those words, and latterly even in his sleep ; also, that in his Bible they were double-lined by him.

Silence Farm

It was some slight relief to her when, one June day, she found herself once more at Silence Farm, to learn that Mr. Morton had recently discharged the farm-girls who had been there in Mr. Ruthven's time. There were only two others now, strangers to her; and her work was to be chiefly in the dairy and in the byres.

Weeks passed before she entered the house itself. One day Mr. Morton came upon her as she stood looking fixedly at the front of the house. She had thought he was gone to Muirton, but he had returned across the fields, having decided against whatever project had induced him to set out for the little town.

"Come in, Margaret. There's no reason, surely, why you shouldn't come in."

"I would rather not."

"Tuts, lass! You needna be sentimental because you once lived here. After all, it was not your own."

"It's no for the likes o' me to gang into gentryfolks' houses," she said roughly.

Andrew Morton looked at her curiously.

"I tell ye what, Margaret Gray: I think ye're a fool."

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"I've thocht that sae lang mysel', Mr. Morton, that I dinna mind hearin' o't again."

"Why should you speak like that? It's not natural to you. You are a girl of good education, and good manners, too. My uncle said you were a better-bred as well as a handsomer woman than might be seen along the whole countryside."

"That was gae kind o' Lord Kinrye."

"And why, just because of a change in life, and because you have had to take up as a farm-girl again, you should refuse to consort with any but the farm-folk, and should make a point o' speaking broad Scotch, I can't make out."

"I'm just a farm-girl, Mr. Morton, and I intend to remain one—leastways, as long as I'm at Silence Farm."

"Well, I've something to say to you that I can't say out here. Come in, Margaret; there's no one in the parlour, and I want to speak to you."

In silence they entered the house. When they were in the little room she remembered so well, she kept her gaze from wandering to the cottage-piano she had once loved so much, or from the old bookcase where she

Silence Farm

had often opened unexpected windows into unknown regions.

“Miss Gray.”

She glanced apprehensively at the speaker.

“Miss Gray, I want to ask you one thing. If you met a man who could love you, and whom you could love, would you give up all this nonsense, and be yourself again?”

“I dinna ken what ye’re at,” she answered obstinately.

Andrew Morton gave an impatient shrug.

“You know quite well. If you won’t speak decent English, you can at least understand it. Would this craze end?”

“I cannot be ither than mysel’, Mr. Morton.”

“Then it’s your wish to be a rough, uncouth farm-lass for life?”

“Ay.”

He looked at her, bewildered.

“You’re very different from other women, Margaret Gray.”

Then, as she did not answer him, he went on :

“Supposing a man like myself were to tell you that he admired you, both for your looks and your character, and that he would be

Silence Farm

willing to marry you, if you went away for a time, and lived as a lady, and came back fit to take a wife's place at, say, a house like Silence Farm?"

"What do I ken o' such a man, Mr. Morton?"

"But supposing I myself were to ask you that question?"

"Folk wud laugh at Lord Kinrye's nephew marryin' a farm-lass. She wud never be taken for a lady, an' he wud find that oot gae soon. How would Lord Kinrye's nephew like to take his wife to the Castle, and to know that every servant in the place knew she had been accustomed to milk the kye an' clean the byres?"

Andrew Morton lowered his eyes. He had not thought of this. The girl was right. After a little he glanced up.

"Well, I was only putting it that way to find out if nothing would make you alter your silly way of lowering yourself."

Margaret looked steadfastly at him out of her proud eyes.

"Would it, Margaret? You know what I mean: would nothing make you change your mind?"

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"No."

"Why?"

"That lies wi' me, Mr. Morton."

"You're an obstinate fool, that's what you are. See here, I'll give you another chance. Will you go to Edinburgh if I get you a good place there? I know a lady, my cousin, Mrs. Arbuthnot, who would be glad to have you as a companion and as a governess for her little girl. They're great folk for books an' the like, the Arbuthnотов, an' you would be in your element there, as I've heard you were thought a great reader here."

"I'm no reader, Mr. Morton. I'll never look in a book again. They're a' lies."

"My own belief is that you're not yourself, Margaret. Your mind's a bit unhinged. It would be better for you to go to my cousin's."

"I thank ye, sir, but I canna do't."

Morton turned angrily.

"Well, you fool, do you understand that if you stay here it'll be as the farm-girl, an' nothing more, now or ever?"

"That's a' I ask, Mr. Morton."

"Then off wi' you now, an' don't stand clattering any longer. Go an' give Jock a

Silence Farm

hand with cleaning out the big sty, an' tell him if it's not done by twelve o' the clock I'll ask you an' him the reason why."

Without a word the girl turned and left the room.

Andrew Morton took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"My! she's an obstinate jade," he muttered; "and, by the Lord, ~~that's~~ a near shave I've had! I'll say this for her—that I don't believe there's another woman in the world in her place who wouldn't have jumped at me. Damn the girl! I don't know whether to be angry or to admire her."

A thought occurred to him. Perhaps she wished only to force his hand. "No," he said beneath his breath; "I've been near to it, but never no nearer, as they say hereaway." Then he remembered her white, still face, her proud eyes, and—the sty.

He had the grace to redden a moment; then, with an awkward laugh, he left the room, muttering, "Well, as she would put it herself, she maun gang her ain gait."

Four months after this abortive effort on the part of Andrew Morton to improve the

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manners and prospects of Margaret Gray's life, he brought a wife to Silence Farm.

Perhaps no one there was more unfeignedly glad than Margaret herself. Life had narrowed for her to the day of labour; all emotion had died out of her heart. Between them, Archibald and James Ruthven had killed the woman the one had loved secretly as daughter, the other secretly and disloyally as a lover. She had no wish but to be left alone, in the rough life of the fields and the farm; no instinct but to go back to these rude lands, to be ever in close touch with them, to have the companionship of the kindly brutes she knew and loved, to be intimate with every natural sight and sound —the moorland, the gray skies or great cloud-swept azure, wind and rain, mist and dew, the haze of frost and haze of heat, where alike the breaths of the kye hung in smoky drifts above the grass.

Thus only, she knew, she could live and keep her soul alive. Elsewhere she would die, or that within her which must not be allowed to die. In the town, or anywhere else, a frost would settle upon her. She could live the life of the poor, be one of

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them, labour without ceasing, grow old without leisure, die without rest. It was the common way. She was content. All that was sweet and tender in her came out when she was with old, broken folk like Peter and Janet Strang. With the old and poor she was ever a daughter. In some indescribable way, too, Silence Farm had become to her the one possible place to live and die in. If Mr. Morton became so poor that he could afford no extra "labour," she would stay for no wage, but only her keep. Sometimes, till it had become too absolute to need words, she argued with herself about this, but always with the same result. For some reason she could not explain even to herself, too, she clung to Silence Farm out of a kind of loyalty to Archibald Ruthven. It was the last of the old Ruthven heritage. He had loved the place with all his heart. She had often heard him say that he could not bear the idea that no Ruthven should tread the soil of Rivenshaugh, as the place had been called in old days.

And she . . . was she not a Ruthven?

None knew it. Silence Farm was the 'right name for her dwelling-place. None

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should ever know it. But she was a Ruthven. The last money she had been able to realize before she left Moss Dykes had been expended in the re-purchase of the double grave in Restalrig Cemetery, near Edinburgh: for when Margaret Gray, her mother, had died, Archibald Ruthven had bought two graves, so that in the end he and his love might lie quiet together.

When her time came she would be laid beside her unknown mother. Below that other "Margaret Gray Ruthven" was to be inscribed "And Margaret Gray Ruthven, her daughter." She had found it easier to forgive her father, for that he had inscribed his own name on the tombstone after that of the woman whom he had loved and wronged. "So some of the Ruthvens shall lie in Kirk o' Ruthven kirkyard," she would say to herself, "and one away in a strange land, and one at Restalrig."

For a time she had never felt easy about Andrew Morton. The man alternated between harsh ill-will and overpressing eagerness to do her an unwished-for kindness. Now that he was married she knew that he would think no more of her, but let her be.

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It was about a week after the homecoming, and when an October of singular quietude and golden beauty was almost at its close, that one late afternoon Rob Mackay, the postman, as he tramped along the Muirton Moor path which skirted the western march of Silence Farm, caught sight of a woman standing on the turnip-field across the dyke, and staring against the way of the sun as she leaned on her hoe, statuesque against the red, frosty light.

He stood looking at her. "A fine lass!" he muttered, as he noted the tall, robust figure, the sunburned bare legs beneath the striped kirtle, the moulded lines of the big thighs, the broad breast, the white neck, and the mass of ruddy brown hair only partially hidden by the great white "fly-away," or flapping cotton sun-bonnet.

The air was chill, with faint uprising mist. A bluish smoke—more than bloom, less than smoke—lay upon the blue-green leaves of the turnips, yellowish where cut or trampled. The brown fallows were purple. The dozen rooks, flying low or awkwardly jerking here and there, shone inky black. The air was heavy with decayed leaves.

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"She's like a pictur'," the man muttered, as he stared at her, silent, motionlessly leaning on her hoe, lit with that sunset light. "She'd weigh twal' stone if she weighs twa," he thought admiringly.

At last he gave a rude hail.

Margaret looked slowly round.

"Here's a letter for your leddyship, Miss Gray!" he cried ironically, laughing boorishly, as though the courtesy of the surname were a grotesque incongruity.

Margaret slowly advanced.

"Why didna it come at noon wi' the hoose letters? I saw the laird an' the laird's leddy, an' they spak' no word o't."

"Oo, I jist forgot it, Madge. Here 'tis. Come, lass, gie's a kiss, an' ye can hae your bit letter."

The girl threw back the white flaps of her sun-bonnet and laughed mirthlessly.

"Dinna mak' yersel' oot a greater fule than God made ye, Rob Mackay! Gie me ma letter, an' gang yer ain gait. Puir men-bodies like yersel' shouldna be let loose wi'oot a laddie to herd ye safe hame."

The man gave a loud guffaw. The rustic wit was to his taste.

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"Sakes, but ye're a fine lass, Madge, though a bit owreblown for *my* taste, ye ken ; forbye that, I wadna——"

But here the letter was snatched from his grasp, and Margaret turned away. He had, however, got a glimpse of her face and of her shaking hands.

"So," he thought shrewdly, "she has a lad in Ameriky, has she? An' he'll no be much o' a lad, either, for she hasna had a letter this twa month nor mair—'deed, I dinna thole she's had yin sin' she cam' back to the farm."

"Weel, guid-nicht," he cried ; "an' when ye write ye can tell him that Rob Mackay thinks gac weel o' ye for a weel-favoured lass!"

The woman did not answer. She had forgotten him and all else. The letter was from James Ruthven. It was headed "Detroit P. O., Michigan." Her lips formed the words as she read them.

"I'll be damned if I write again, Margaret Gray ! You are a coward—and worse. I'm pretty sure o' *that*. And so good-bye to you, my gay Madge—'my rare pale Margaret !'

"JIM.

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"P.S.—How goes the reading, eh? Or does your new flame not set much store by books? My! you're a queer one, and I'm half in love with you still—the more fool me! Well, it's good-bye now, any way —‘and the deil's ain luck to ye!’ as they say Drayboro'-awa'."

Margaret read and re-read the letter impassively. She thrust it into her bodice, and went on with her hoeing.

When the flaming round ball hung on the verge of the moorland, and turned blood-red and then grew dusky as with rising smoke, and at last slit lengthwise and lay half in half out a purple ledge of darkness, she stood erect, gathered in a few stray turnips to the last heap, and slowly cleaned her hoe.

As deliberately and impassively she took the letter from her bodice, and tore it into fragments. Then, having hoed a hole in the moist earth, she put these into it, and scraped some earth over them, and trampled on it. There were some weeds in her hoe; she took these out, and threw them on the ground—as idly, as unthinkingly, with the one as with the other.

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Turning westward, she smelt the keen moorland air, chill with rising damp and the frosty breath, and pungent with the all-pervading smell of turnips. Then, throwing her hoe across her stalwart shoulder, she tramped homeward.

When she reached the cartroad she overtook an old man, whom she recognised as Gavin Anderson, the woodcutter.

They passed good-evening to each other, and then walked on in silence, side by side, through the quick-gathering dusk.

Each understood. Companionship was enough. With labouring folk, when they are tired, a little food, a warm fire, shelter, are all they look for.

They passed a spinney, and heard a cock-pheasant's harsh, rattling screech echo through the wood. In a distant field a bull bellowed angrily. An occasional lowing floated on the evening air from the unseen pastures.

The old man's face brightened when he saw the smoke rising from the thatched cottage where he and his old crippled wife waited patiently for the end. It was his hope that the rheumatics would not get so

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bad that he would have to trouble the parish till after he had buried the wife.

"Good-night, Gavin," Margaret said as they parted, but without stopping in their steady tramp.

The old man nodded, and plodded heavily down his by-way.

When she reached Silence Farm she found her supper of porridge was half cold. She ate it uncomplainingly, and then went over by the kitchen fire, and stood warming her hands.

The door opened suddenly, and Mr. Morton entered, looking angry and impatient.

"Where's everybody gone to? Sarah, where are the lads? There's never a man about the place when he's wanted. Look here, Madge, my lass, ye've had your supper an' don't want to go to bed yet, I'm sure, so off you go to the byres an' clean them 'out. They're fair clogged wi' dung. Mr. Stewart, Lord Kinrye's new factor, is coming over to-night, an' he's fair dementit on clean byres an' such-like."

Without a word Margaret left the room. Once outside, she turned and went to her

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roof-raftered room in the loft above the dairies. Stooping by her box, she took out a book. It was the copy of "Evangeline" she had once loved so well, and the sole thing of all her old possessions she had kept.

"It's the last," she muttered; "it is the only book I have kept, and that only because he read it to me that Sabbath morn under the Larches, and because I was reading it again on that day—that day when God slept."

Putting it in her pocket, she rose, and went downstairs, and crossed to the byres.

When, weary though she was with labour since daybreak, she had raked away the dung, and spread clean straw about, and slushed down the byre gutters, she took the book from her pocket. Wrenching off the covers, she swiftly tore the leaves into small pieces, then thrust all into the manure-heap.

She stood awhile, as though listening or pondering. She was not listening, she was not pondering.

Taking a heavy iron shovel, she piled up a barrow with the dung, and then wheeled it outside. On her way to the manure-heap, a farm labourer accosted her.

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"Hello, Marget, ye're daft for wark. I nivver seen a lass like ye."

"That's more nor ony yin 'ud ever say o' you, Jock," she answered, with a laugh.

"Weel, gie 's a han' the morn, will ye? We're a' at sixes an' sevens the noo, wi' baith Tam Short an' Bob Meiklejohn awa' at Muirton Fair. An' we've got to bull the new brown coo the first thing. It's no a lass's wark, but will ye gie me a han', Meggan, an' I'll gie ye a faerin', as sure 's death, when I get my wage come Saturday nicht?"

He laughed hoarsely.

With a rough laugh Margaret answered; adding, as she passed him:

"Awa' wi your havers!"

When she came back there was no one in the byre-yard. Jock Stevenson had lit the lantern which swung above the byre-door, and the yellow light flickered across the flagstones.

Margaret slowly walked past the new styes at the end of the potato-field, till she stood on the moor-edge.

As on a night long, long ago, she saw again through the gloaming, though more

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dimly, for now the darkness had fallen, the patient, motionless figure of the old white horse. He was standing, staring, his head towards the west.

It was a night of singular solemnity. Through the windless calm a sigh rose from the seemingly immeasurable moorland. Above arched an immense dark-blue wilderness, wherein the stars trembled and glittered with bright frosty fire. Often a brilliant meteor streamed to the zenith, or sudden stars swept out of one gulf of heaven into another, flashing momentarily.

For a long time Margaret stood staring out into the darkness. When she turned, her hair glistened with dew. She shivered with the night-chill as she stumbled back the rough way to Silence Farm.

THE END.

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